The Online Teaching Survival Guide
Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips

JUDITH V. BOETTCHER | RITA-MARIE CONRAD
How Are Online Courses Unique?

The major differences between online and campus courses can be summarized in five characteristics:

* * *

1. **The faculty role shifts to coaching and mentoring.** A faculty’s role in online courses is primarily coaching, mentoring, guiding, and directing learning rather than lecturing and telling. Online courses are more of a bottom-up development of knowledge that require learners to interact with one another and the content resources to construct their knowledge rather than relying on the trickle-down delivery of content from an instructor. This is actually good, as more research is indicating that lecturing is an inefficient way of learning. In most lectures, learners are too passive for much higher-level learning to occur (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith 1986; Wieman, 2008). This shift means that you as an instructor do not have to spend a great deal of time preparing for live lectures. The time for teaching a course shifts to preparing short mini-lectures and introductions, preparing facilitation and community building experiences, and monitoring and guiding students in their learning experiences.

2. **Meetings are asynchronous.** Online class discussions are primarily asynchronous—at different times—rather than synchronous—at the same time. Since online discussions are asynchronous and require learners’ comments and statements, there is an unwritten requirement that learners reflect on what they have learned from the resource assignments before they come to class (online) to participate in the course activities, such as posting their responses in the discussion areas. The online classrooms now provide opportunities for synchronous gatherings, but good online practice uses this time for discussions, question-and-answer sessions, collaborative project work, and presentations.

3. **Learners are more active.** Learners’ dialogue and activity are increased in online courses. Learners must do more thinking, writing, doing, sharing, reflecting, and peer reviewing as part of a community of learners. Students often come to a campus class without completing the reading assignment and expect that the instructor will enlighten them, saving themselves time. Learners in an online course cannot hide passively. If they have not prepared and processed the content prior to posting their discussion responses, that shortcoming is evident to
everyone. Learners are therefore motivated to complete the readings to interact well with the others. This change means that faculty must design discussion forums with effective catalyst discussion questions before the course begins.

4. *Learning resources and spaces are more flexible.* Content resources are now increasingly mobile, accessible on smartphones, iPods, and other small, mobile, hand-held devices. This means that learners have many more options than in the past as to when, where, and with whom they work on course goals. Too much flexibility can encourage lax participation, so establishing a weekly rhythm and regular milestones is essential. The world of content resources is also much expanded. In addition to the usual mix of required, highly recommended, and other resources, students will be suggesting and contributing and creating additional content resources.

5. *Assessment is continuous.* Assessment in online courses is continuous, multiphased and often community based rather than concentrated, monitored, and primarily individual (Moallem, 2005). This is pedagogically beneficial and makes cheating and other forms of fraud more difficult. In other words, continuous assessment means that you get to know the students and students get to know other students. Assessment in online courses is also more varied, using low-stakes automated quizzes; frequent, regular postings in discussion forums; short papers; case studies and scenario building; and customizable projects. This means redesigning course assessment plans. Effective assessment in online courses requires getting to know learners as individuals and investing more time in coaching and mentoring. The good news is that most online course assessments are not closed book tests and thus do not require proctoring, eliminating a whole range of potential challenges.

* * *

Although these are the primary differences in online courses, campus courses and online courses are still more similar than different. Also, with the growing popularity of blended courses (those that have both online and traditional formats), the courses are actually becoming even more similar. This means that a good way of beginning your own personal development toward being an online instructor is to shift your campus course to a blended environment that combines online activities with classroom-based activities.
TABLE 1.1

Types of Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion of Content Delivered Online</th>
<th>Type of Course</th>
<th>Typical Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Traditional face-to-face</td>
<td>Course with no online technology used; content is delivered in writing or orally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 29 percent</td>
<td>Web facilitated</td>
<td>Course that uses Web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. Uses a course management system or Web pages to post the syllabus and assignments, for example.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 79 percent</td>
<td>Blended/hybrid</td>
<td>Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. A substantial proportion of the content is delivered online; typically uses online discussions and has some face-to-face meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 percent or more</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically has no face-to-face meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Allen and Seaman (2008) and Boettcher and Conrad (2004).

Three Types of Online Courses

Table 1.1 defines three types of online courses. The first type of course listed is the traditional face-to-face course. As you design your online course, you will likely be in the category of an online course, which is defined as a course where most or all of the content is delivered online and that “typically has some face-to-face meetings.” The definitions in the table have been adapted somewhat. The table defines an online course as having no face-to-face meetings, but many programs are designed with occasional face-to-face gatherings for introductory, assessment, or celebratory meetings. This is to be preferred if it is at all possible.

The Four Stages of a Course

Each stage of a course is different and depends on how the four elements of the learner, faulty-mentor, content, and environment interact and flow.
More detailed descriptions of what is happening in each of these stages, including the themes and the tools, are in later chapters.

The tables following this section summarize the learner and the faculty behaviors and experiences for each of the four stages. The themes that are common to each stage include learner responsibilities and behavior; faculty responsibilities and behavior, including the content of the three presences: social, teaching, and cognitive; how content knowledge and resources interact with a learner’s readiness; and the potential tools for the environment. An overarching theme for the learner and the faculty is the development of a learning community. Chapters Four to Eleven go into detail about how to accomplish the goals of each of these stages.

In the first phase of a course, the goals are to launch the course well, laying the groundwork for a learning community in which learners and faculty support one another in the accomplishment of course goals. Table 1.2 describes some of the behaviors and goals that are characteristic of a good course beginning.

In the second phase of a course, subtitled, “Keeping the Ball Rolling,” the primary goal is for the learner to become deeply engaged with the content, laying the basis for more complex learning and course projects in the latter half of the course and for the development of the learning community. Table 1.3 summarizes the behaviors and goals that are characteristic of a good early middle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>TABLE 1.2</strong></th>
<th><strong>Phase One: Course Beginnings—Starting Off on the Right Foot</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learner</strong></td>
<td>Posting background and pictures; getting to know fellow learners; familiarizing self with course goals and setting personal and customized objectives; testing and using the course tools; ensuring access to course resources; understanding the syllabus and course requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faculty-mentor</strong></td>
<td>Establishing quick trust, promoting social presence; getting acquainted with learners' backgrounds, their points of learning readiness, and personal learning goals; ensuring that all learners are present and engaged; making course expectations clear and explicit; supportive and directed teaching presence so that learners know you and your expertise as well; modeling cognitive framework for course content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Access to supplemental content resources in place; learners have acquired core required resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Tools for the designed learning experiences are in place, and learners know how to use them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 1.3
Phase Two: Early Middle—Keeping the Ball Rolling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Settles into a weekly rhythm of readings, postings, collaborating with at least a few fellow learners in the course community; developing a sense of the problem space of the content, engaging with core concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty-mentor</td>
<td>Continuing strong teaching presence, guiding the learning of core concepts and spiraling and connecting ideas and content; supporting community and work in small teams, intense cognitive presence, and supporting learners' exploration and testing of ideas; balancing the need to cover content with the need for understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>Learners are intensely exploring, engaging, and identifying more content resources and bringing them to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Community has settled into a routine of using a set number of tools for collaboration, teaming, and learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1.4
Phase Three: Late Middle—Letting Go of the Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Engaging well with course concepts and applying core concepts in scenarios, identifying patterns and relationships, supporting and challenging others’ ideas and proposals as an accepted member of the community, dealing with complex problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty-mentor</td>
<td>Processes are well established; community is mostly working; faculty shifts time from large group teaching presence to more personalized and small group teaching presence; supporting more learners-as-leaders experiences; reviewing, mentoring projects, and providing feedback on assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>Learners are creating content as they learn and sharing with others in wikis, blogs, projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Learners are actively using course tools and may be expanding beyond and personalizing tools and bringing results back to the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the third phase of a course, subtitled, “Letting Go of the Power,” the learner begins to focus on particular case studies, scenarios, and other discipline or course issues. Table 1.4 summarizes the behaviors and goals that are characteristic of a stimulating late middle of a course.

In the fourth and last phase of a course, subtitled, “Pruning, Reflecting, and Wrapping Up,” the primary goal is for the learner to complete a positive learning experience and identify the knowledge and skills they have
Chapter Overview

Teaching online and within a course management system for the first time can feel like exploring a new and unfamiliar space: the individual components look familiar, but the overall feeling is quite different.

Although research into teaching online is still in its infancy, it has affirmed a number of online practices that contribute to an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience for faculty and students. This chapter provides a set of ten best practices to help you on your journey in developing expertise in online teaching. We selected these ten from teaching and learning research studies and best practices that have been developed over the past fifteen to twenty years of online teaching and learning. Instructors who follow these practices will increase the probabilities of providing an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience.

Just as the ten core learning principles in Chapter Two are not necessarily “the” best set of core learning principles, this set of practices is not necessarily “the” best set; rather, it is a set of practices that captures much of what we now know about effective and efficient teaching online. These practices will likely continue to evolve with continuing research and practice.

Ten Best Practices for Beginning Online Teaching

Table 3.1 sets out ten best practices to guide your initial online teaching experiences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best practice 1</th>
<th>Be present at the course site.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 2</td>
<td>Create a supportive online course community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 3</td>
<td>Develop a set of explicit expectations for your learners and yourself as to how you will communicate and how much time students should be working on the course each week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 4</td>
<td>Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 5</td>
<td>Use synchronous and asynchronous activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 6</td>
<td>Ask for informal feedback early in the term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 7</td>
<td>Prepare discussion posts that invite responses, questions, discussions, and reflections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 8</td>
<td>Search out and use content resources that are available in digital format if possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 9</td>
<td>Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best practice 10</td>
<td>Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Best Practice 1: Be Present at the Course Site**

Being present at the course site is the most fundamental and important of all the practices. Over time, we have learned to quantify what it means to “be present.” The best online faculty, according to students, are faculty who are present multiple times a week, and at best daily. No matter how expectations are communicated regarding faculty availability, the default mode is twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Students expect online faculty to be present when they are there, no matter the day or the time, unless explicitly told otherwise.

Thus, one of the most important expectations for online faculty is—if at all possible—to be present in some way every day. These expectations can be modified, and students will be very accepting if their faculty clearly states personal policies on presence and provides notice if family or professional events cause deviation from these policies.

Liberal use of tools, such as announcements, discussion board postings, and faculty blogs, lets students know just when the faculty member will likely be present for fast turnaround on questions and potentially available for live interaction by phone or collaborative online tools. These same tools can communicate when the faculty member may be away for an extended time—say, two days or more. Strategies such as assigning a student or a team of two students to monitor question forums or blogs can
also be a good stand-in for the faculty presence for a day or two and create community support and networking connections.

Why is presence so important in the online environment? When faculty actively interact and engage students in a face-to-face classroom, the class evolves as a group and develops intellectual and personal bonds. The same type of community bonding happens in an online setting if the faculty presence is felt consistently. Regular, thoughtful, daily presence shows the students that the faculty member cares about who they are, cares about their questions and concerns, and is generally present for them to do the mentoring, guiding, and challenging that teaching is all about. In other words, text and audio presence compensate for the physical remoteness of online learning and the lack of face-to-face presence.

One posted message from students that you do not want on your site is the question, “Is anybody there?” Such a posting would be made only by a student who is feeling abandoned, alone, and isolated—a clear and unambiguous signal that not all is well.

The concept of daily presence may be alarming to you as it might fuel the widely reported perception that online courses take significantly more faculty time than classroom-based courses. One way to create a sense of presence without it consuming too much time is to focus discussions on the course site and avoid one-to-one e-mails. Time-released announcements that remind learners of assignment due dates and prepared audio containing additional content that can be swiftly uploaded midweek are other ways to let the learners know you are there.

Of course, there is the danger that too much faculty presence will stunt the discussions as well as delay the development of learner self-direction. So while you may check in to the Web site daily for a few minutes to see if there are questions, by no means feel that you have to add significant daily comments to the course site.

Research on faculty presence suggests that there are three types of presence: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). More about these types of presence are in the tips in Part Two.

**Best Practice 2: Create a Supportive Online Course Community**

Nurturing a learning community as part of an online course is almost as important as being a significant presence. A learning community in a face-to-face environment often develops spontaneously as students generally have more opportunities to get to know one another and develop
friendships outside a particular course. More explicit nurturing and planning is required in the online environment for a learning community to develop.

Community building is the focus of much research in online learning (Brown, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Shea, 2006). Some of the research seeks to define a community; other research examines the stages of a community and the faculty and student behaviors that facilitate community building at these different stages.

Here's how to get started with designing community into an online course. (Many more ideas are in the chapters with tips in Part Two.) A good strategy for developing a supportive online course community is to design a course with a balanced set of dialogues. This means designing a course so that the three dialogues of faculty to learner (F-L), learner to learner (L-L), and learner to resource (L-R) are about equal (Pelikan, 1992). In one online course, the F-L dialogue might be accomplished with three types of communications: short mini-concept introductions, twice-weekly announcements, and interactions with the student postings. In another course, this dialogue might be accomplished with a combination of announcements, discussion postings and monitoring, written mini-lectures, or audio/video podcasts.

Encouraging the L-L dialogue can be done with one or more of these strategies:

- Launch the class with a personal introduction posting so that students get to know one another and you get to know about the students and their interests. The types of information often shared by faculty and students at the beginning of a course touch on professional experiences and personal data such as family, friends, pets, or hobbies, often supported by a photograph or two. It is not uncommon to see pictures of learners with their dog or car or engaged in a hiking, kayaking, skiing, or another activity. Faculty also often include information about their teaching philosophy and current work or research projects.

- Encourage the use of a general open student forum for students to post and request help and assistance from each other through the various peer-to-peer tools, such as discussions and help areas. Learners can use this type of space as a first place to go for help from each other. Think of this place as a student union or coffee shop where students can collaborate, brainstorm, and support one another.

- Divide a larger class into small groups of four to six, similar to a study group, that students can depend on for supportive networking or
mentoring, including help in identifying resources or clarifying key points of a class assignment.

- Set up problem-solving forums or discussion boards, and assign students or student teams to monitor and support direct questions.

Not all learners will respond to these strategies for encouraging the building of a learning community. Learning within the setting of an online course community will work better for some students than for others. Some students may choose not to participate very actively at all; others find it is the best way for them to learn. The point is that for students who need it, it is an essential part of how they learn. Vygotsky’s theories remind us of how much we learn as social beings within a social context. The online community is part of what makes this happen for many students.

**Best Practice 3: Develop a Set of Explicit Expectations for Your Learners and for Yourself as to How You Will Communicate and How Much Time Students Should Be Working on the Course Each Week**

This best practice cannot be overemphasized. It clarifies, specifies expectations, and reduces uncertainty. Develop and post prominently on your course site a set of explicit expectations for how students are expected to communicate online and how you expect them to communicate with you. For example, some faculty have a rule that they do not answer content-focused e-mails. This is a good practice because content-focused queries belong in one of the many public spaces of the course site. Queries and responses posted in open course spaces benefit all the learners, as students see both the questions and the responses, and you can develop expectations that students can answer each other’s questions. Of course, e-mail remains a good choice for personal and confidential communications.

What about a policy on response time for questions posted on a course site or to e-mail? Institutions have varying policies on this question. Some institutions with large online programs have a policy that faculty are expected to respond to learners within twenty-four hours during the week. Expectations for responses during the weekend can vary, but as most working professionals work on their online courses during the weekend, faculty should establish a general rule as to weekend windows of opportunity.

Another common effective practice is for online faculty to schedule special virtual office hours, being available by chat or live classroom,
e-mail, or phone, particularly when learners are likely to be working on an important assignment. In the interests of time and community, it is best to use a communication tool where responses and content can be shared with everyone and archived for flexibility in access and review.

This basic expectation of response time can easily be modified as long as the change is communicated to the students. It is easy to develop your own policies or rules of thumb if the institution does not have them in place. Think about the students as family for the duration of a course or program. Students are very accepting of a faculty member’s time and life requirements if they know what is going on. And students often step in and help each other even more when they know a faculty member is sick, traveling, or engaged in significant professional or family obligations. Often students can agree to monitor course questions posted in the open forum or in the discussion boards, for example.

Online learning is just as intensive as learning face-to-face, and time to do the work needs to be scheduled and planned for, just as if one were attending face-to-face classes. Being clear as to how much effort and time will be required on a weekly basis keeps surprises to a minimum.

How much time should learners be expected to dedicate on a weekly basis to an online course? A good rule of thumb is six hours of productive learning time that is used for activities such as reading and processing content, as well as participating in online discussions. For many learners, it can take ten hours to achieve the six productive hours.

**Best Practice 4: Use a Variety of Large Group, Small Group, and Individual Work Experiences**

A learning community works better when a variety of activities and experiences is offered. Online courses can be more enjoyable and effective when students have the opportunity to brainstorm and work through concepts and assignments with one or two or more fellow students. Of course, some students work and learn best on their own. Building in options and opportunities for students to work together and individually is highly recommended.

Teams are particularly effective when students are working on complex case studies or scenarios for the first time. Early in a course, students may like to get to know one another by working with just one or two other students in teams of two or three. Later in the course, with more complex projects, groups of three or four can work well. It is also important to build in whole class activities such as discussion boards or events with invited experts.
Best Practice 5: Use Synchronous and Asynchronous Activities

When online courses were introduced, they were almost totally asynchronous—an updated version of the correspondence distance learning courses so widespread in the middle of the twentieth century. Now we have course management systems, virtual live classrooms, spontaneous collaboration tools, and an almost infinite number of Web tools and smartphones that support synchronous chat, video messaging, and more. These tools make it possible to do almost everything that we do in face-to-face classrooms. In addition, we can often engage learners in more extensive collaborative and reflective activities.

Sometimes there is nothing better than a real-time interactive brainstorming and sharing discussion; at other times, the requirement to think, plan, write, and reflect is what makes learning most effective for an individual. The variety of activities now possible online makes it easy to create many types of effective learning environments. For example, in financial and statistical courses, real-time problem-solving and question-and-answer review sessions can be effective learning strategies. While working professionals often choose to complete advanced degrees online so that they can make use of the asynchronous, anytime, anywhere features of a program, these same learners enjoy getting together at a specific time to interact in real time.

Best Practice 6: Ask for Informal Feedback Early in the Term

Course evaluations have been called postmortem evaluations because they are done after the fact, and nothing can be changed to increase the satisfaction of the students making the comments. Early feedback surveys or informal discussions are effective in getting students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course and solicit suggestions and ideas on what might help them have a better course experience. This early feedback is done in about week 3 of a fifteen-week course so time is available to make corrections and modifications while the course is ongoing. A request for informal feedback is an easy opening for students who might have comments, suggestions, or questions. A simple e-mail or discussion forum asking one or two of these questions works well:

- What’s working thus far?
- How could your learning experience be improved?
- What do you want or need help with?
• What are the top three to five understandings you have learned thus far?

Best Practice 7: Prepare Discussion Posts That Invite Responses, Questions, Discussions, and Reflections

One of the primary differences between the online teaching classroom and the classroom of the campus-based course is how students and faculty communicate and the range of tools that they use to do so. After all, we don’t see the students; rather, we get to know them by what they write and say in the discussion boards and their assignments and, to a lesser degree, in e-mail, phone, and collaborative online classrooms.

The communication tool that is the heart and soul of the online course community is the discussion board. This is the primary place where faculty talk to students and students talk to other students. This is also the place where students and faculty get to know one another and the tool that helps a widely dispersed group of students and faculty become a learning community.

Discussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class. A key difference, of course, is that these discussions are asynchronous, meaning that students have time for thought and reflection. Another key difference is that discussions, blogs, and other tools require written or audio comments that are captured and become part of a course archive.

Discussions are often designed for one of the following learning purposes (Painter, Coffin, & Hewings, 2003; Goodyear et al., 2003, cited in Grogan, 2005):

• Providing an open question-and-answer forum
• Encouraging critical or creative thinking
• Reinforcing domain or procedural processes
• Achieving social interaction and community building so that students get to know each other personally and intellectually
• Validating experiences
• Supporting students in their own reflections and inquiries

Here are a few hints for discussion postings culled from many conversations with experienced online faculty:

• Create open-ended questions that learners can explore and apply the concepts that they are learning.
• Model Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions. “Why do you think that?” “What is your reasoning?” “Is there an alternative strategy?”

• Ask clarifying questions that encourage students to think about what they know and don’t know.

• Stagger due dates of the responses, and consider a midpoint summary or encouraging comments.

• Provide guidelines and instruction on responding to other students. For example, suggest a two-part response: (1) “Say what you liked or agreed with or what resonated with you,” and (2) “Conclude with a follow-up question such as what you are wondering about or curious about.”

• Provide choices and options. Providing choices for students in questioning follows the recommended design principle of encouraging personalized and customized learning. Working professionals are often grappling with many issues; providing choices and options makes it possible to link the learning more directly with their work experiences, interests, and needs.

• Don’t post questions soliciting basic facts or questions for which there is an obvious yes-or-no response. The reason for this is obvious: once one student responds, there is not much more to say. Specific fact-based questions that you want to be sure that your students know are good items for automated quizzes or for students to record in blogs.

• Log on to your course a minimum of four days a week to answer e-mail, monitor discussions, post reminders, and hold online office hours. For higher satisfaction for you and your students, log in every day.

Best Practice 8: Search Out and Use Content Resources That Are Available in Digital Format If Possible

If content is not digital, it is as if it does not exist for most students. This means that students will more likely use content, resources, and applications that are online, digital, and readily available. They want to be learning anywhere, anytime, and often while they are doing other things, such as driving, taking care of children, or exercising. Carrying around large, heavy textbooks feels like an anachronism to them.

Book publishers are now making more of their content available digitally. Some institutions are running pilot programs with students using
the new larger-screen Kindle from Amazon or one of the Apple iPod series. Selecting a textbook available in multiple formats can be a boon to students, particularly working professionals who may have heavy travel schedules. For many courses, however, textbooks are not yet available in digital form, but publishers are responding. This best practice can be applied to supplementary resources and library resources. A reference document with instructions on remotely accessing library resources is a must for online courses. In addition, a key member of the instructional team is the library reference person assigned to support online learners.

Students enjoy seeing how what they are learning links to current events. Thus, building links to current events into discussions, blogs, and announcements supports the exploration stage of early grappling with core course concepts. So this best practice includes encouraging students to make good use of Internet resources. You might want to consider enlisting student assistance in identifying high-quality content that is available online. This can include tutorials, simulations, and supplementary material. The number and quality of tutorials in complex concepts in physics, chemistry, engineering, and business continue to grow. Students enjoy searching and testing these resources and often engage more deeply as they use resources that they may have found themselves.

**Best Practice 9: Combine Core Concept Learning with Customized and Personalized Learning**

This best practice combines a number of basic learning principles, many of them addressed in more depth in the tips in Part Two. Briefly, this principle means that faculty need to identify the core concepts to be learned in a course—the performance goals and learning outcomes—and then guide and mentor learners through a set of increasingly complex, personalized, and customized learning activities to help learners apply these core concepts and develop their own knowledge structures. Vygotsky’s principle of the zone of proximal development includes the concept that the learning experiences ought to pull students’ learning forward, always in advance of development (Del Rio & Alvarez, 2007).

In practical terms for online courses, it means designing options and choices within learning experiences, assignments, and special projects. Supporting learners with their personal and professional goals that are closely linked to the performance goals of a course and even beyond the course parameters is a win-win situation for the learners individually and as a group. It enhances the meaningfulness of the learning and infuses learner enthusiasm in completing the assignments.
Another key principle that aids in concept learning is also inspired by Vygotsky (1962, 1978). He noted that concepts are not words, but rather organized and intricate knowledge clusters. This simple but profound principle means that while we must teach in a linear fashion, presenting concepts individually and in small clusters, we need to continually reapply core concepts within a context, such as those in case studies, problems, and analyses.

Effectively learning concepts, as we know from studies of novice and expert learners, requires a focus on patterns and relationships, not only on individual facts or vocabulary.

A popular new teaching and learning suggestion advocates making students’ thinking visible (Collins, Brown, & Holm, 1991). Making our thinking visible requires students to create, talk, write, explain, analyze, judge, report, and inquire. These types of activities make it clear to students themselves, the faculty, and fellow learners what they know or don’t know, what they are puzzled about, and about what they might be curious. Such activities stimulate students’ growth from concept awareness to concept acquisition, building in that series of intellectual operations that Vygotsky believes is required for concept acquisition.

Discussion forums, blogging, journals, wikis, and similar social networking type tools provide excellent communication channels for engaging learners in clarifying and enlarging their mental models or concepts and building links and identifying relationships.

**Best Practice 10: Plan a Good Closing and Wrap Activity for the Course**

As courses start coming to a close and winding down, it is easy to focus on assessing and grading students and forget the value of a good closing experience. In the final weeks of a course, students are likely to be stressed and somewhat overwhelmed by the remaining work. In this state, they often do not pause to make the lists and do the planning that can help reduce stress and provide a calming atmosphere. A useful image for reducing stress is in David Allen’s book, *Getting Things Done* (2002). Allen notes that making a list helps us to clear the “psychic RAM” of our brains so that we feel more relaxed and more in control. Once we have made lists and prepared our schedule, we don’t have to continually remind ourselves of what needs to be done and when.

End-of-course experiences often include student presentations, summaries, and analyses. These reports and presentations provide insights into what useful knowledge students are taking away from a course.
At the same time, these learning events can provide a final opportunity for faculty to remind students of core concepts and fundamental principles. These end-of-course experiences are a good time to use live classrooms, YouTube, and other synchronous collaborative tools.

Conclusion

Traditional courses have long focused on tools and techniques for presenting content. Traditional concerns of faculty focused on covering the material, getting through the book, and meeting expectations so that faculty in other courses wouldn’t muse and wonder, “Didn’t you learn these concepts from faculty X? And didn’t you study the work and contributions of [fill in your favorite who]?”

A major drawback with course designs that have content as a priority is that it often focuses attention on what the faculty member is doing, thinking, and talking about and not on the interaction and engagement of students with the core concepts and skills of a course. Recent trends in higher education are encouraging a focus on learners as a priority, resulting in many publications such as Launching a Learning-Centered College (O’Banion, 1999). This movement refocuses instruction on the learner and away from the content, a shift that encourages faculty to develop a habit of asking questions such as, “What is going on inside the learner’s head?” “How much of the content and the tools can he or she actually use?” “What are learners thinking, and how did they arrive at their respective positions?”

We have much to learn about teaching and learning, and specifically about teaching and learning in the online environment. The good news is that we now know much more than what we did when online learning started in the early 1990s.

Summary—and What’s Next

This set of ten best practices is really the tip of the iceberg in developing expertise in teaching online, but we hope you find it a useful set of practices as you get started. The next eight chapters provide many tips and examples for teaching online, as well as summaries and themes for what is happening in the four phases of a course.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools and Applications in Course Beginnings Tips</th>
<th>Course Beginning Tip Number</th>
<th>Suggested Pedagogical Uses and Purposes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mail, announcements, and discussion forums</td>
<td>CB 1</td>
<td>Basic and essential communication tools for guiding learning and building a learning community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio and video lectures and resources</td>
<td>CB 1</td>
<td>Creating a media-rich learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audacity audio software (free at <a href="http://www.audacity.com">www.audacity.com</a>)</td>
<td>CB 1</td>
<td>Creating announcements, short mini-lectures, or concept introductions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs: Online journals, either part of a CMS or separate applications</td>
<td>CB 1, CB 6, CB 7</td>
<td>Capturing students’ thinking as they learn and a place for others to comment and suggest if desired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis: Collaborative project tool, part of a CMS or separate application</td>
<td>CB 1, CB 6, CB 7</td>
<td>Supporting student collaboration and teamwork on projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube: A Web site for posting short videos</td>
<td>CB 1</td>
<td>A place for posting videos and early concept introductions or for process demonstrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course management system, such as Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Sakai, Moodle, and WebStudy</td>
<td>CB 1</td>
<td>Providing a virtual place to gather, meet, think out loud, learn, and practice; these systems are like virtual classrooms and campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text messaging, instant messaging, and Twittering</td>
<td>CB 2, CB 6</td>
<td>Good nearly synchronous tools that faculty can use to be available for quick information checks, for example, before an assignment is due</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnitin software</td>
<td>CB 3</td>
<td>Software for detecting plagiarism; many institutions have a site license for this and it is linked to the CMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking sites: Facebook, MySpace, Ning, and LinkedIn</td>
<td>CB 4</td>
<td>Internet sites for social networking and extended community that can supplement course places and carry networking beyond courses and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous collaboration tools and online classrooms: Elluminate, Wimba, and Acrobat Connect</td>
<td>CB 4</td>
<td>Synchronous tools that generally need to be part of the online teaching and learning infrastructure linked to the institution’s CMS; can be used for scheduled or spontaneous group meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• CB Tip 9: Managing and Evaluating Discussion Postings
• CB Tip 10: The Faculty Role in the First Weeks: Required and Recommended Actions

GETTING READY AND GETTING ACQUAINTED

The first set of tips in this chapter describes the tasks to be completed to ensure a smooth launch of the course and the initial experiences that help to create a social learning community. One of the tips describes how an online syllabus differs from a campus syllabus; other tips describe ways to support the development of social and cognitive presence so that students and faculty get to know one another as a person and as a learner.

CB Tip 1: Course Launch Preparations:
The Essential Course Elements of an Online Course

This tip answers questions such as these:

• What course elements, such as a syllabus and assessment plans, are essential to have ready for students before the start of a course?

• What course elements should be ready for an instructor to feel comfortable at the start of an online course?

• Is there a checklist that I can use to review my course?

One way of describing a course is that it is a set of learning experiences designed to guide learners as they acquire and are assessed on a specific set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The set of experiences and the processes for assessing learners need to be designed, which leads us to the question, “What course elements are essential to be designed and developed before launching a course?” This tip identifies those essential course elements and the steps in getting them ready.

Essential Course Pieces

The course elements that must be completed for an online course are the syllabus, the weekly plans and discussion postings for the first weeks, and the course site. The syllabus is a familiar part of the teaching process for a faculty. Building the other online course components is less familiar, but almost all have an analogue in the face-to-face class. Just as a new face-to-face course goes through a gradual process of refinement, faculty can anticipate that it generally takes about three cycles of teaching a course for it to be fully developed. During the initial three cycles, faculty develop a
new set of teaching behaviors for guiding, mentoring, and assessing students in an online environment. Here is a brief description of each of these critical course pieces.

**Syllabus**
The syllabus for an online course performs the same functions as for a face-to-face class, but even more so. Providing a bird’s-eye picture of the whole course so that learners can plan their lives is essential to learners’ having a sense of control and optimism.

The online syllabus sets out the overall course plan with performance goals, learning outcomes, and requirements. It includes a description of the core content resources (textbook, readings, audio and video resources, and so forth), the course schedule, the assessment plan, and policies and procedures. A syllabus may also contain the boilerplate information on library access, technical support, and contact information for noncourse-specific questions. More detail on building a syllabus and how the various components differ in an online course is in CB Tip 3.

**Weekly Teaching Guides**
In planning a face-to-face course, many faculty devote significant time to creating and developing lectures. For online teaching, the time spent in preparing lectures transforms into preparing short text, audio or video introductions or mini-lectures, developing and managing threaded discussions, and monitoring other student spaces, such as forums on the course site. Lectures in the face-to-face class are the primary channel for faculty-to-student dialogue. This is important to the teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) as these lectures convey the special expertise and personality of the instructor. In the online classroom, the equivalent teaching presence is expressed in the weekly plans, teaching guides, discussions, and faculty comments and observations.

Weekly teaching guides are short text, audio, or video pieces that introduce the goals and purposes and activities for the week. They often provide the rationale for the choice and design of the learning experiences and a brief introduction to the core concepts. Creating short personal videos is so easy now that some faculty are preparing short mini-lecture videos and posting them on YouTube. For example, the short video introductions at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAj5uBKyqv8, prepared by Tony Picciano of Hunter College for graduate programs in education, are generally about two to six minutes long. Part of the high value of these videos is the opportunity to hear as well as see the instructor.
However, video weekly teaching guides are not critical. Some faculty use some forms of video, including live classrooms, when visual graphs or pictures are necessary to better convey the particular content being discussed. In your first cycle of teaching, just use whatever tool feels best to you. It may be text introductions, and that is fine.

**Discussions and Rubrics**
The discussion board in an online course is the equivalent of a whole class or small group discussion in a campus class. The discussion board is the primary place where dialogue, discussion, and peer-to-peer interaction take place. The student postings in discussion boards and in other Web tools such as blogs and wikis are where faculty “see” their students. Rather than seeing their students’ eyes and faces, the discussion postings are even more revealing of what the students know or think they know and may be about to think.

Investing time in developing good questions for the discussion boards and planning out the scoring rubrics and evaluation of the discussion boards makes a real difference in how quickly a learning community starts to form in a course. Experienced online faculty will plan out all of the discussions before a course begins. This is absolutely recommended for your first online course as a faculty mentor. You may find that you will want to make changes as you get to know your students, but having the discussions planned raises your confidence and lowers your stress. Since you may decide to make changes in the specifics of the discussions, counsel students not to work too far ahead of the group as a whole. It is possible that you would like to know more about rubrics as you are developing your discussion questions. (For more about rubrics, see CB Tip 9 and Early Middle [EM] Tip 5.)

**Course Site**
The campus classroom serves as a gathering place for interactions, sharing learning experiences and small and large class activities. In an online course, these gatherings take place online, often in a learning management system (LMS) or course management system (CMS) such as Blackboard, Moodle, or Sakai. A course site is the “physical space” for the online classroom. This is where the instructor and students gather, share thinking, ideas, and complete the course requirements. You as the faculty mentor serve as the hub, the host, the glue of the learning community.

In getting a course site ready, your first step is to complete the administrative paperwork with the information technology services group at
your institution to request that a course site be set up. At some institutions, this may be done automatically, but a good rule is to leave nothing to chance. Textbooks are often ordered many months before a course launches. For online programs, this might be done by a departmental administrative staff member in the middle of the previous term. If textbooks haven’t been ordered and it is time for the course to begin, work with the support staff to offer alternatives such as online bookstores or even arrange with publishers for permission to scan a chapter or two to keep students moving forward in the course until they receive their textbooks.

This is a good time to check on the details of what might be needed to get a course site up. If you have enough time prior to the first offering of a course, you may find it helpful to have a practice site set up months in advance or to use an online course site with a campus class.

The other items that a faculty member is responsible for becoming familiar with is the institution’s information on library access, technical support, and contact information for noncourse-specific questions for online students. One rule of thumb that is a time saver is making certain this information is prominent, so that the students know whom they should contact for noncontent questions. This is a highly effective way of building loyalty to the institution as the students develop relationships with a broader instructional team.

**To-Do List for Preparing an Online Course**

You may find this summary to-do list useful as you develop your online course. Note this assumes that someone else is in charge of finding and recruiting students for your class, just as for a regular campus class:

1. Find out who is responsible for setting up the course site. If you don’t know where to start, start with the person who assigned you the task of teaching online.

2. Make a request for a course site. While that is under way, work on the syllabus.

3. If you have this course designed for a face-to-face course, start with your existing syllabus. Review your course performance goals and learning outcomes, and consider how realistic and appropriate they are for an online course. If you can, review the course goals prior to and following your course.

4. Review and select textbooks. If you have a choice between a textbook with digital content and one without, choose the textbook with a set of rich expanded materials online and one that offers an option of formats.
5. Order the textbooks.

6. Prepare the syllabus, using this and other syllabus tips. Part of preparing your syllabus will be to identify the eight to ten modules or chapters for your course.

7. Check to see if there is a standard course template for your online course for your college or institution. These templates often contain the standard boilerplate information as well as the standard set of tools that are available to you.

8. Be sure you can access your course site and that the template for your institution and program is in place for your site, or request it.

9. Prepare a draft of your assessment plan, being sure to have multiple points of assessment and including points for discussion, assignments, quizzes, and projects.

10. Plan out the full course schedule, being sure to take note of universal holidays and events particular to your institution. Plan assignments so you can get feedback to your students in a reasonable time. Think in terms of a regular weekly rhythm.

11. Prepare discussion postings, and post them in the course site. Prepare the rubrics for posting.

12. Review actions and plans for the week before the course starts and the next three weeks.

13. Ask for feedback from another instructor or use the Quality Matters rubric. Check standards of quality for an online course. (More on these quality checks follow.)

In the midst of getting ready, it is easy to forget how important it is to complete your own getting-acquainted posting. For this introductory posting, be sure to include a picture of yourself, your favorite food, current book that you are reading or perhaps writing, research interests, or other introductory information.

Table 5.1 summarizes the critical course elements and shows their relationship to one another.

**Quality Standards for an Online Course**

This section is not absolutely required for launching an online course, but it is a good reference to use for checking the quality of a course. It is definitely a resource to use before the second delivery of a course. How do you evaluate your course? If you would like to do a quick check, a useful checklist is available at the Quality Matters Institute. This rubric
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Elements</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>The overall plan for the course with performance goals and requirements. It usually includes an overview of the course goals, a description of the core content resources (textbook, readings, other resources), the course schedule, and the assessment plan. A syllabus may also contain boilerplate information on policies and procedures, library access, technical support, and contact information for noncourse-specific questions. Check to see if your institution has a syllabus template and use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content resources, including textbook (often a section of the syllabus)</td>
<td>Required and recommended resources for core content and initial application of core concepts, plus starting points for resources for more complex customized and personalized learning experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment plan (often a section of the syllabus)</td>
<td>Summarizes the assessment activities for assessing student learning and ideally maps the assessment experiences to performance goals and requirements. Online assessment plans include multiple assessment experiences, including low-stakes quizzes, peer responses and reviews, concept integration papers, and high-stake projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers, projects, and quizzes</td>
<td>The usual components of an assessment plan. These are the products of students' learning. The requirements for each of these are in the assessment plan. The directions and specifications for projects and papers are often separate documents; the quizzes, if any, are within the quiz section of the course management system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule of class activities and events</td>
<td>The overall course calendar that summarizes the course activities. This course calendar usually needs fine-tuning to ensure a balanced course design: balanced dialogue, a range of individual and group activities, and synchronous and asynchronous events. Learners use this course calendar to integrate their life events over the term of a course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online classroom: The course site</td>
<td>Where learners and faculty gather for the course experiences and activities. Getting a course site ready for an online class means getting the syllabus ready and preparing the resources and activities. The resources include the teaching guides, the discussions, and planned individual work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching guides</td>
<td>A set of introductions and guides for each of the course topics and modules and setting out the requirements and specifications for student action and learning. These teaching guides are part of the prepared teaching presence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Elements</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions and interactions</td>
<td>A set of catalyst discussion questions, usually a set for each week, that focus on the course core concepts and performance goals. These discussions are the means by which community grows, develops, and flourishes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual work and reflection</td>
<td>The learning work that students complete more or less on their own: reading, writing, researching, or collaborating with another learner or a study group. The resources, learning outcomes, and goals of these activities are designed in broad terms by the instructor, but the instructor is generally not present while the learner is doing the work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

was developed as part of the Quality Matters (QM) project funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The goal of the project is to provide tools for assessing and ensuring the quality of online courses. The rubric has eight sections that address the key elements of online courses.

- Course overview and introduction
- Learning objectives and outcomes
- Assessment and measurement
- Resources and materials
- Learner interaction
- Course technology
- Learner support
- Accessibility

This rubric is now part of a for-profit entity that certifies online courses with the Quality Matters rubric. However, use of the FY 05/06 Quality Matters Rubric (webbasedinstruction.googlepages.com/C7_QMRubric.pdf) is not constrained and is a good checklist as you are getting started. A research paper (Legon, 2006) comparing the Quality Matters rubric to other online standards and accreditation guidelines from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation affirms that the QM rubric is fully consistent with published accreditation standards for online education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual activity I</td>
<td>Assignment: Listening, reading, creating (1.0 hour)</td>
<td>Discussion board readings and postings (1.5 hours)</td>
<td>Assignment: Listening, reading, creating (1.0 hour)</td>
<td>Assignment: Discussion board readings and postings (1.5 hours)</td>
<td>Assignment: Occasionally survey/feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-R dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual activity II</td>
<td>Discussion board opens</td>
<td>Discussion board readings and postings (1.5 hours)</td>
<td>Self-test quiz review (30 minutes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-F and L-L dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual activity III</td>
<td>(L-R dialogue)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual activity IV</td>
<td>Instant messaging, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)</td>
<td>Instant messaging, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)</td>
<td>Instant messaging, social networking, e-mail (20 minutes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-L dialogue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group or team activity</td>
<td>(L-L dialogue)</td>
<td>Possible group activity day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty activity</td>
<td>Feedback to students on previous week discussions</td>
<td>Special availability hours</td>
<td>Monitoring and scanning student interactions plus possible audio/video Q&amp;A session</td>
<td>Special availability hours</td>
<td>Monitoring and scanning student interactions plus possible audio/video Q&amp;A session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Room with a View

Task: Introductory exercise for the beginning of a course
Objective: To find commonalities with others in the learning community
Authors: Joan Vandervelde, University of Northern Iowa, Director, Online Professional Development, vanderveldej@uni.edu; Chris Vadnais, Air Force Broadcasting Service, vadnais@host6.net; Simone Sandler, Senior Lecturer, Bar Ilan University, ssandler@mail.biu.ac.il; Charles Christison, University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Instructional Designer, chrischa@uwplatt.edu; Mike Levenhagen, Oshkosh Truck Corporation, Continuous Improvement Trainer, mlevenhagen@osstruck.com; Dennis O’Connor, Instructor, University of Northern Iowa, dennis.oconnor@uni.edu
Method: Asynchronous

Instructions
Describe (in vivid detail) the view from your favorite window. Weave some autobiographical information into your “view.” For example, “I’m looking out over our pool where my son learned to swim this weekend. It also overlooks a lake. When we lived in Arizona we dreamed about living by water and now that we are here in Florida that has become a reality.” Read what others have written and respond to two peers’ postings indicating why you would like to trade places for a day.

Snowball

Task: Introductory exercise for the beginning of a course
Objective: To find commonalities with others in the learning community
Author: Rita-Marie Conrad, Ph.D., Florida State University, rconrad@attglobal.net
Method: Asynchronous or synchronous

Instructions
Have one person enter a basic introduction of himself or herself, including his or her interests. A second person must then enter an introduction of himself or herself and find one thing in common with the first person. A third person then enters his or her introduction and finds one thing in common with the first person and the second person. Each of the rest of the class members then enters an introduction and must find something in common with at least three other people in the class. The first person, in turn, must respond to at least three people with whom he or she has something in common. The second person must respond to at least two additional people. The third person must respond to at least one additional person.

Things

Task: Introductory exercise for the beginning of a course
Objective: To introduce students’ interests and background to classmates in an innovative way
Author: J. Ana Donaldson, Ed.D., University of Northern Iowa, ana.donaldson@uni.edu
Method: Asynchronous

Instructions
Find an object or a digital image that represents who you are or why you are taking this course or even what your research interests might be. Post a description of the object on the discussion board and explain why you chose that particular object. At tach a digital image of your object: a scanned image, digital picture, or Web-linked image, for example. Include a brief description of your expectations for the class in the explanation of your object.
CB Tip 3: How an Online Syllabus Is Different

This tip answers questions such as these:

- Which areas of my syllabus need to be changed for an online course? What about strategies for assessing learning, for discussions and dialogue, and for weekly pacing?
- Should information and policies about netiquette and plagiarism tools be included?

If you are modifying an existing campus course for the online learning environment, many of the core components of a course can remain the same—for example:

- Course description
- Performance goals and learning outcomes
- Content resources such as textbooks and access to supplementary recommended resources. This section may be expanded to include more online resources. Instructions about where to purchase a textbook or other required resources are essential. Online courses generally move quickly, and students must have required resources on hand when the course begins.
- Assignments. You might add instructions on how to turn in the assignment online if this hasn’t been covered in other orientation material.

The sections in a syllabus that will be different for an online course include policies, procedures, and the mechanics about how to communicate and learn in an online environment. Just as there are effective practices for faculty, there are effective practices for learners that they may need to learn.

Instructors usually do not have to remind students how to behave in a classroom: students generally know the script for a campus classroom. They come in, find a seat, and begin to take notes and ask questions once the lecture starts (although sometimes we have to remind them not to sleep, play computer games, or text their friends). In an online learning environment, we cannot assume that learners know how to communicate effectively with an instructor or their fellow students. They may have extensive experience in online chatrooms and virtual environments, such as Second Life, but they may need to learn how to communicate well in the more structured course environments. Here are sections to consider including in a syllabus for an online course:

- Netiquette guidelines, or how to communicate effectively and courteously online. There are many good sites for netiquette, so don’t feel you have to
make up a set of these rules on your own. Here are a couple of starting points:


- *Top 26 Most Important Rules of Email Etiquette*. These are also applicable to discussion posts (http://email.about.com/od/emailnetiquette/tp/core_netiquette.htm).

- *Emoticons*. These are symbols that are used to add emotion to text. The one that is most used is “colon-dash-right parenthesis,” which becomes a happy face. Here are a couple of sites describing emoticons and their meanings: http://messenger.msn.com/Resource/Emoticons.aspx and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon. Some faculty discourage the use of emoticons, but as long as they are used tastefully, they convey some invisible body language.

- *Communication patterns*. Remind students that communication patterns in an online course are different from those in the face-to-face environment. In face-to-face environments, the instructor is in front of the students, and most questions are directed to him or her, so communication patterns flow predominantly between faculty and students. In the online course site content, questions are posted in the question forum and not in a private e-mail to the instructor. The purpose of the online question forum, or questions within a threaded discussion, is to encourage whole class or group participation in content discussions. All content comments are public to the class members and the instructor, unless exceptions seem prudent. This communication pattern of one to many and many to one, regardless of role, encourages community, course discussion, brainstorming, and mutual help. A separate space, such as an open forum area, can be established strictly for socializing. Other communication patterns can be used in wikis or blogs.

- *Plagiarism*. A section on plagiarism, particularly what it is and how to avoid it, can be helpful. If your syllabus already includes an institutional academic honor policy, it may not address the ease of plagiarism today and how to avoid inadvertent plagiarism. Here are some sites to consider directing your students to on this topic:


resource. Examples of these dialogues are reading assignments, watching or listening to streaming lectures or presentations, analyzing and solving problems, reading and responding to online discussion forums, online postings in blogs or wikis, online quizzes, sending or receiving instant messages, e-mail, and general research or thinking. Although these activities can be done at any time, a time to do them needs to be scheduled. Experience has taught us that if something can be done anywhere and anytime, it usually never gets done.

Other types of learning activities are learning events that students do with other students or with the instructor. The dialogue between students is expressed as learner-to-learner (L-L) or peer-to-peer dialogue; dialogue between students and faculty is expressed as faculty to learner (F-L) dialogue. Examples of L-L activities include participation in team or group meetings and study or review sessions. Examples of F-L dialogue include participation in review or presentation sessions as well as all the asynchronous monitoring and commenting. Thus, it is important to set aside specific times for these kinds of activities.

CREATING AND DESIGNING DISCUSSIONS

The second set of tips for the course beginnings focuses on the purpose and effective use of discussion boards. One of the tips describes the characteristics of questions that elicit engagement, reflection, and community, followed by a tip on strategies for managing and evaluating discussion postings as one tool in assessing student learning. The last tip in the chapter focuses on the faculty role in the threaded discussions and how the faculty role changes over the phases of a course.

CB Tip 7: The Why and How of Discussion Boards: Their Role in the Online Course

This tip answers questions such as these:

- Why are discussion boards so important in an online course? Are there any other tools, such as wikis and blogs, that can be used for similar purposes?
- What types of learning goals are discussion boards good for?
- How are questions for online discussions different from questions in class discussions?
- How many discussion questions should be posted in a course each week?
• Are there guidelines or requirements for student responses to discussion questions?

The purpose of discussion boards or forums in an online course is similar to planned discussions in a classroom-based course, only much more so. We like to think of discussion boards as the “campfire” around which course community and bonding occur at the same time that content processing and knowledge development are happening. Discussion boards are designed so that the discussions are threaded, meaning that learners post their comments and respond to one another asynchronously. New discussions or threads are started for new topics.

Discussion activities provide an expressive space for learners to process, analyze, and make connections among ideas. Sometimes a large percentage of course activities are receptive or passive: learners are reading, listening, watching, and paying attention. In a classroom-based course, active or expressive activities such as quizzes and short presentations are often used only to provide data for assessing a student’s learning.

In the online classroom space, discussions play a much larger role. Discussion activities give all learners a chance, and in fact they generally require learners to reflect on the ideas in the content resources or the ideas expressed by other students, and then to write about what they think, know, and reason from those ideas. It is this cycle of reading, reflecting, considering, and making connections that actually changes the knowledge structure inside the learner’s brain. Often it is only when students are responding to a question or to another student’s ideas that they begin to know what they think or know or, sometimes more important, what they don’t know. (We know what we know only when we actually write or state it in some way.) Discussion activities give students a way to describe how they are integrating incoming knowledge with their existing knowledge structures. The discussion boards provide time and opportunity to explore and develop ideas collaboratively and recognize and build shared values. These expressive activities often help crystallize students’ thoughts and increase confidence in what they think and why. (See Bonk & Zhang, 2008, for a similar cycle: read, reflect, display, and do.)

Best Learning Goals for Discussion Boards

One distinction between online discussion questions and class discussion questions is that the instructor generally plans the online discussion in more detail with more specific goals in mind. One reason this is important is that it is difficult to modify the posted questions and the posted
hear the learner’s voice. Groups also by their very nature can produce more content for review and feedback. What is extremely important is for the faculty member to stay involved with each of the groups and monitor and mentor their activities and learning outcomes and products. Without the instructor’s active involvement and feedback, learners can discuss topics and possibly reach conclusions without adequate expert overview and guidance. In a classroom, faculty float and walk around, checking on how discussions are proceeding. This same type of overview and guidance is essential to the online group experiences.

**EM Tip 7: Sharing the Teaching and Learning: Working with a Teaching Assistant**

This tip answers questions such as these:

- When is an online teaching assistant needed?
- What are some of the tasks that an online teaching assistant generally handles?
- What are some of the pros and cons of having a teaching assistant?

As online class sizes grow, administrators often bargain increasing the size of a class with assigning or offering a teaching assistant or offering some type of compensation for additional students. A general rule of thumb is that it is almost essential to have a teaching assistant if an online undergraduate class is more than twenty-five students or a graduate class is more than eighteen to twenty students.

Your first response may be, “I would rather do it myself.” Faculty are generally accustomed to doing it all: designing and developing the class, sometimes modifying it along the way, getting to know all the students, and monitoring and guiding the students’ learning.

How do you share these complex tasks with someone who might have a different perspective on the content and typically less experience with the teaching process? In fact, sharing the teaching with a teaching assistant is generally a win-win situation and can be a rewarding way of teaching. It is true that sharing the teaching with a teaching assistant can initially require more time and energy than not having one. But the time-to-benefit ratio is usually positive. Moreover, the course community can benefit from hearing and seeing slightly differing perspectives from experts, and this built-in cognitive dissonance can lead to stimulating and lively discussions and debates.

If a teaching assistant is not likely for you, consider whether you can design strategies for students to share some of the tasks.
Teaching Assistant Job Description

One of the most important tasks is establishing roles and responsibilities for the teaching assistant that lay out what you each will do and will not do. Include personal goals and expectations from each party. It also is useful to lay out times that each would like to have (or need) a break from the course responsibilities and how each will adjust the duties during those times.

A good approach is to discuss which elements a teaching assistant might take primary responsibility for and which elements you and the teaching assistant might do together. Many of the tasks involving grading and assessing of students can go smoothly if the rubrics and the scoring are determined collaboratively before the course begins. Here are some of the elements of a course to consider sharing with a teaching assistant:

- Discussion forums—monitoring participation and flow of the dialogue
- Quizzes—monitoring the completion of these and any items that require grading or evaluation
- Support and formation of teams and collaborative work
- Grading and review of course assessments such as discussions and project milestones
- Tutoring and facilitating regular question-and-answer sessions
- Support of course teaching and management tasks, including interacting with and mentoring students who need advice or help

The task that many faculty delegate to the online teaching assistant is the daily monitoring and mentoring of the discussion board and forums, ensuring that all students are participating and interacting and making thoughtful contributions. As the discussion area is the primary site where community develops, daily or almost daily notes and observations by a member of the teaching team give a sense of a vibrant online classroom where interesting things are happening and people care about each other’s ideas. At the same time, the students want to regularly hear the voice of the faculty member, so it is important that the senior faculty member make postings and observations, offer encouragement, and answer questions as well. The good news is that these postings need not be a daily task. Also, one of the goals for the teaching assistant will be to increase his or her level of content expertise, and working collaboratively in the discussion forum is a good way of achieving this goal.

By monitoring the discussion areas, a teaching assistant can also be the first to identify individuals who might benefit from outreach and special