Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses

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Overview

This document is intended to serve as a guide for instructors teaching World Campus. After brief considerations of both the student population and the online educational environment, we will provide a "checklist" of best practices for effective online teaching. Please note, however, that all first-time online instructors should complete OL 2000: "Essentials of Online Teaching" or an equivalent course through World Campus Online Faculty Development. Such courses are free for Penn State faculty and graduate students, and provide a far more detailed introduction to current techniques, theories, and best practices for online education.

Student Population
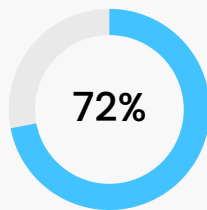
World Campus Students are typically older than resident students. The majority of our students (72%) are 23-39 years old, with an average age of 30. Less than 15% of our students are 22 years old or younger.

72%

Students who are first-time freshmen represent only 6% of the World Campus student population. The vast majority of World Campus students are adult learners, who are returning to finish a degree after some time away from the university. Most are actively employed and/or raising families. A significant proportion (roughly 1/5) of our World Campus students are also active military or veteran service members.

These demographics have important implications that must inform our approach to online teaching. Our students are often dealing with the challenges of adult life. They may be active military personnel stationed abroad with limited internet capabilities. They may be juggling child-/elder-care with work responsibilities. For these reasons, flexibility and compassion is key to student success in our online program. Be willing to offer extra help and guidance to students who are having difficulty with assignments and lesson concepts. Within reason, please be willing to work with students on assignment due dates. If you notice that a student's work has fallen off or that they have stopped submitting assignments, reach out to them to determine if you can help. Such measures will not only help the student who may be struggling with the course material, but also provide a safety net for those dealing with unexpected life challenges. We want to ensure that we retain students in our courses, rather than have them fall away for any number of reasons as the course progresses.

The Online Environment
(Residence vs. Online Education)

In residence instruction, we develop personal, face-to-face relationships with students as a matter of course. We see and interact with them in person every week. They learn our personality, expertise, and integrity from this regular contact, and we, in turn, learn about their personalities and capabilities. In this way, we collectively develop a personal rapport that encourages and facilitates the learning environment.

In contrast, our online courses utilize a CANVAS platform, rather than the classroom, as the main forum for instruction and delivery of information. Faculty and instructional designers have developed the course content in a way that is suited to this platform. The courses are asynchronous, allowing students to work through lessons and complete assignments at their own pace. While instructors are expected to hold weekly Zoom office hours and meet with students virtually by request, their primary form of communication with students is indirect, via announcements, emails, and assignment comments.

This learning environment has consequences for how we conduct ourselves and interact with students as proficient online instructors. Professional, polite, and frequent communication is key to developing a rapport and building trust with students in lieu of personal interactions. For this reason, instructors should be cautious of language or turns-of-phrase in communications that students might misconstrue as careless, or even rude and unprofessional. Frequent communication and timely responses show students that you are present and active in the course. Instructors should provide introductions to lesson content and explain upcoming assignments at the beginning of each week. Follow-up or end-of-week communication is also encouraged. Instructors should also respond to student requests, questions, and general communications within 24 hours. Finally, timely grading and precise comments assure students of an instructor's professionalism and expertise in the subject matter. Barring exceptional circumstances, instructors should return student grades within one week of the assignment due date. Grade comments should be detailed and specific, ensuring that students know exactly why they received a grade and how they might improve their work for the future.
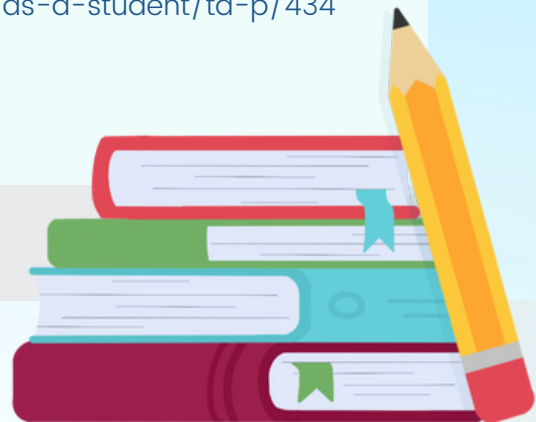
Checklists

for Teaching Online Courses

The remaining pages include checklists of requirements
for teaching online courses.
Please review each one carefully.

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Prior to the First Day of Classes

- Fill out the Instructor Introduction page with your personal information in the Orientation Module.

- Review the Instructor Guide and other Instructor Resources in Canvas and contact your ID and IDA with any questions. Please email both the ID and IDA with all questions/concerns.

- Check all web links to outside sources in your course lessons to ensure that they are in working order. If you find that a link is broken or leads to an incorrect page, please notify your ID, IDA, and the Director of Online Education. They will either fix the link or find an alternative web source.

- If your course requires group work, add a reminder to your personal calendar to assign students to groups after the first week of classes.

- Send Welcome Email: One week prior to the start of courses, email students via LionPath to introduce yourself and the course, provide information about the text and assignments, and provide a link to Canvas (for new students). If you will be using Announcements, ask that students ensure that their notifications are turned on along with a link to https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-my-Canvas-notification-settings-as-a-student/ta-p/434

Accommodation Requests

- Contact your ID and IDA for assistance in responding to accommodation requests promptly: SDR Office will provide paperwork approximately two weeks prior to the semester, but these requests may come through during the first few weeks of classes.

- Alert your ID and IDA if a student contacts you directly for accommodation. The student must provide paperwork to the SDR Office for any accommodation that is needed. We can assist you in contacting that office for assistance.

On the First Day of Class

- Ensure your course has been published on the morning of the first day of class. The Filippelli Institute typically takes care of this for instructors, but it is possible for a course to be missed, especially if a previous instructor preferred to publish the course themselves.

- Ensure that all Course Reserve materials are showing in Canvas. Note: Due to Copyright Laws, Course Reserve materials do not appear in Canvas until the first day of class.

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Communication with Students

- Instructor-Student Emails: Per World Campus recommendation, use the Canvas email feature with individual students to ensure your communication with students is secure and documented.

- Weekly Emails to Class: Send emails or post announcements to the students at the beginning of each week (Sunday or Monday) to introduce the lesson and remind students of the assignments and deadlines for the week. Please be sure to explain the instructions for each assignment. NOTE: If you are using announcements, you may prepare announcements ahead of time and use the "delay" feature to post on a specific date and time.

- Be polite, professional, and encouraging in your communications with students.

- Respond to student questions and communications within 24 hours.

- Maintain at least three regular office hours each week for student appointments. Use Zoom to communicate with students in person. Be flexible when scheduling appointments, as many students will have work during the day.

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Personalization of the Courses

- Complete Instructor Introduction to provide information about yourself to your students. You may want to add a photo or a link to your department biography and/or Linkedin page.

- You may create announcements (or Canvas emails if preferred) that link current events or recent research that are relevant to the content. These must be presented as optional to the students.

- You may also create short videos (<7 minutes) within announcements to introduce the week's content or highlight/explain a more complex concept in the lesson. Important Note: Videos should be considered temporary and only used for the current semester. Instructor-created videos cannot be made a permanent part of the course and should be captioned using Kaltura's captioning feature. If you have a student who is hearing impaired, you will need to provide a transcript with your videos because the accuracy of Kaltura's captioning does not meet standards.

Changes to Courses

- Do not change or provide alternative content or assignments, as this will impact students' success on assessments.

- Request assistance from your ID and IDA when you find typos, broken links, or quiz/exam mistakes.

- Do not change navigation options in the Canvas course.

- Instructors may change or alter due dates for individual students on a case-by-case basis or assign students to discussion groups. The assigned ID and IDA must make all other technical changes to the course.

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Grading

- Read all assigned lesson material (online content, textbooks, and primary sources) so that you are able to provide informed responses to student questions and concerns.

- Provide clear, precise, and detailed comments on student work to reinforce key concepts and improve student performance.

- Use rubrics, if provided, to score projects and papers.

- Post grades within one week of the assignment due date. If you are unable to post grades within this allotted time, write to students to explain the delay and let them know when they can expect their grades.

- Post final course grades to Lionpath within 48 hours of the course end date or the receipt of the final assignment for the course.

Student Support Issues

- Monitor the course for students who may miss several assignments or underperform. Reach out to these students and offer help!

- Notify the Director of Online Education in the event of student problems or complaints.

- Complete Starfish Reports throughout the semester.

Tech Support Issues

- Email or call the assigned ID and ID for assistance during work hours (M-F, 8am to 5pm).

- Email or call World Campus Help Desk for assistance during the evenings and weekends.

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