

# Research-Based Online Teaching Practices

## Intro

Teaching online differs greatly from teaching face-to-face classes. Therefore, the evaluation criteria developed by FSCJ online as part of the annual evaluation process are based on teaching practices that have been found to be effective in the online environment.

Even though many of our courses utilize a Center for eLearning Developed Shell- in which all of the content is already provided - it is vitally important that online instructors create a strong presence and engage frequently with their students in order to be truly effective. This guide is meant to offer research-based suggestions that align with the teaching criteria for online classes. By utilizing these strategies, the learning experience should be more enjoyable for both students and instructors.

To make this guide easier, it begins with a quick reference of research-based teaching strategies. You may continue reading to find each topic developed further. Finally, if you would like to delve even deeper, the reference list at the end of the document provides the information for all sources, and these are readily available online.

## Strategies Quick Reference

- Send weekly announcements via Canvas to remind students of upcoming deadlines, and suggest that students allow email notifications so that they receive them that way as well.
- Address students by name when applicable.
- Respond promptly to student questions via email or Canvas, and be available to meet for office hours by appointment.
- At the beginning of the term, ask students if they are new to the online learning environment. If any students are, take the time to reach out to them with some helpful advice concerning online discussions if applicable.
- Facilitate better discussions by responding to between every 2-10 student posts with specific questions. Highlight important points, and help students get back on track when they get sidetracked.
- While sharing expertise, avoid being strongly opinionated in discussions so that students feel free to develop their own ideas.
- Provide examples to students for different assignment types to help students understand expectations.
- Set due dates in Canvas. For discussions, inform students of the due date for initial post versus response posts.
- Utilize a precise and supportive tone to help encourage students while offering constructive criticism and additional information.
- In discussions, encourage students to ask questions of each other and to feel comfortable with politely disagreeing with each other in order to develop critical thinking skills. Ensure that answering these questions is a requirement when grading.
- Grade in a timely manner.
- If your course has rubrics, be sure to use them.
- Keep the level of academic rigor equal to what you would expect in a face-to-face class.
- Read your rubrics, and if you find them vague, you may make adjustments or contact FSCJ Online support staff for advice.
- Be specific in grading feedback so that students know how to improve. You might include links to specific web or course resources.
- Offer personal assistance when you see that students are not scoring well.

## Engagement

When teaching face-to-face, instructor-student engagement can easily be taken for granted; however, in an online classroom, a concerted effort must be made to create that feeling of connection that students seek.

- Instructor engagement has been linked to an improvement in retention rates along with a reduction in isolation amongst students (Martin & Bollinger, 2018).
- “Consistent interaction with students at the individual and group levels help set academic expectations among students” (Martin & Bollinger, 2018, p. 208).

## Communications

The main way to engage students and create social presence is to communicate with them. Weekly announcements, emails, and discussion boards are the main vehicles to connect with students.

- From survey results, Martin and Bolliger (2018) ascertained that the most important engagement strategy to students was instructor communication via announcements sent through email or in Canvas. This allows for communications to be recorded for later reference.
- When deciding how to best utilize teaching time, “easily inserted” behaviors such as using student names and reminding students of upcoming deadlines are especially impactful in creating a strong online presence (Richardson et al., 2015, p.274).
- From a survey of 624 online students, it was learned that the number one strategy that students desired was “availability/responsiveness,” which includes actions such as offering online office hours at different times during the week, responding reliably to email, and responding to posts or questions within Canvas. The second desire was “engagement/interaction,” which includes posting announcements to remind students of assignments and visibly demonstrating activity and time spent in the online classroom. (Watson et al, 2017).

## Discussions

Online discussion boards can pose a problem for instructors and students alike. Instructors often wonder if they should participate, and if so, in what way. Students can feel lost if they are unfamiliar with the process or if they are unsure of the content. Thankfully, there has been much research on the topic to help instructors understand how to be even more effective.

- Woods and Bliss outlined some helpful, research-based advice for improving the efficaciousness of discussion assignments (2016):
  - It is helpful for instructors to understand that some of their students may be new to online learning or inexperienced in online discussions. Therefore, it is helpful to identify students new to the online learning environment at the beginning of the term in order to help them understand how discussion assignments work.
  - The instructor can improve students' experience by modeling higher-level critical thinking skills by asking questions and guiding them. "Instructors must support the online reflection process by focusing the discussions, asking probing questions and holding students accountable for their responses, and periodically summarizing the discussion" (p. 80).
  - It is also helpful to remind students, up to once a day, that a discussion is ongoing in order to increase participation.
  - Use language that is precise while being supportive (avoiding a harsh tone), so as not to dishearten students.
  - Provide examples of discussions from which students can learn.
  - Providing quick feedback through grading and rubrics is also appreciated by students who wish to understand how to improve.

- Aloni and Harrington (2018) also reviewed research regarding online discussions and provided useful insights.
  - It has been shown that student participation suffers when there is confusion regarding the instructor's expectations or when they do not understand the reason for and benefits of discussion assignments.
  - Another obstacle for participation is when due dates are not established; creating multiple due dates, such as for the initial post and then responses, helps avert procrastination.
  - Another factor that has been shown to inhibit student participation is the perception that no one was interested in the initial post. If instructors and other students respond, an individual is more likely to continue interacting in the discussion.
  - To improve student engagement, using a more structured format, which includes the use of follow-up questions (the answering of which is included in the grading), leads to an increase in student responses.
  - There is a balancing act as it is important that instructors carefully consider how much personal opinion to share lest students become hesitant to create and share their own. "Several studies have shown that a moderate amount of involvement by the instructor is better for fostering critical thinking skills in student than overinvolvement or underinvolvement" (2018, p. 282). The right balance may be for instructors to respond to every 2-10 students.
  - Instructor posts that ask specific questions aimed to help students develop their points further were found to be more helpful than comments that simply agree or disagree.
  - It is helpful for an instructor to highlight important points and bring the conversation back on track as needed.
  - Encouraging students to ask questions of each other during the discussion is a particularly useful way to help build independence, improve critical thinking, and create a sense of community amongst peers. Students should be encouraged to politely disagree with each other in order to deepen the conversation.

## Grading

Grading in the online environment takes on greater meaning than in the face-to-face classroom because it is the main way in which students receive personalized communication and guidance.

- Immediate feedback is essential to increasing students' effectiveness and was rated as the third most helpful strategy by online students (Watson et al., 2017). Researchers agree that providing timely feedback to assignments and using rubrics are extremely important in the online environment (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007).
- Martin and Bolliger (2018) found that the use of rubrics was rated as very important to students as they lead to accuracy and consistency. They also highlighted the importance of following the stated grading policy, providing feedback, and posting grades within a specified timeframe.
- Maintaining an academic rigor that is equivalent to non-online courses is important (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007).
- If a course includes rubrics, students are likely to use them as a reference prior to submitting an assignment in addition to viewing them after grades have been submitted. In addition, rubrics serve as one more means to connect students and instructors. If a rubric is vague, students appreciate receiving specific insights into what can be improved (Haught et al., 2017).
- A correlation between providing timely feedback to assignments and decreasing student procrastination has been observed. Some helpful advice for grading includes utilizing a positive tone, using feedback and rubrics to provide specific reasons for the earned grade, providing a reference either within the course or on the web to help students improve upon a specific skill, and offering personal assistance (Woods & Bliss, 2016).
- A correlation has been observed between use of rubrics and an increase in the number of posts students made in discussion boards. Using a rubric helps students understand what is expected of them, which can also help increase the quality and frequency of discussion posts (Aloni & Harrington, 2018).

## References

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