

10 CLA-TIPS FOR ONLINE TEACHING

These tips gather advice from colleagues in the College of Liberal Arts who are very experienced in online delivery and who still enjoy teaching online – after over a decade in some cases! They are good practices to consider that can be helpful for online teaching and student learning.

STRUCTURE and SYMMETRY

#1 Structuring the course in units or modules helps. Every unit (weekly, bi-weekly, or otherwise) should state what the students will be learning or how the unit is aligned to the overall course outcomes.

>> **Regularity is KEY.** Maintaining the week-to-week structure will help students to avoid second-guessing what's next and to focus on learning content. Trying to keep **SYMMETRIC** (if not identical) **design and pacing** for every unit can be very helpful.

#2 Using a variety of support and media. Recording 2-minute mini-lectures per key topic in every unit will save typing. It also will create a sense of presence in the group. **SOME amount** of relevant Youtube videos or readings from outside the textbook may make things more attractive... However, **it is important NOT TO OVERTAX THE LEARNING PROCESS with too many small, varied assignments.**

>> **Regular “grading” categories** in every unit are easier to process (Ex.: 2 quizzes on the textbook, 1 discussion board on 2 videos, 1 essay on 2 chapters from a reader). There is no need to maintain exactly the same number of items within every category but designing units with clear, ever present categories helps. **A category MAY have DIFFERENT** items or activities every time, but categories that appear in the most possibly “symmetric” fashion every unit are more difficult for students to miss accidentally from one week to the next.

ORIENTED DISCUSSION INSTEAD OF RAMBLING CHATTER

#3 Making discussion boards count. If participation is a mandatory feature for a grade, a good idea could be to publish posts that contain **PART OF THE LESSON** (“stuff to be learned”): this contributes to true discussion beyond the checkmark for participation, as long as the grading policy states it clearly beforehand.

>> **Structured threads in discussion boards** prevent unsubstantial free roaming. **SPECIFIC THREADS THAT ARE DEFINED BEFOREHAND** (from 3 to 10, depending on the size of the class, variety of topics, length of units, etc.) prompt relevant discussion in every unit. Mandatory participation can be predefined with “X” number of NEW posts, and “Y” number of REPLIES in “Z” number of threads.

#4 Showing up in the discussion boards can be like showing up in the “REAL” classroom. Students expect the teacher to be there, and they should be made aware that exams, final projects or other instruments **may address items you write or say in the discussion boards** – as they would in the regular classroom (this contributes to more meaningful participation).

>> **There is NO NEED to respond to every message.** If threads are predefined and clearly structured, **ONE wrap-up message for EVERY THREAD**, that synthesizes the most relevant issues or addresses misconceptions and doubts is what most students expect and can make good use of. A short audio recorded message could be the easiest way to address students’ questions. AND, if references to specific student names are avoided in the audio, some explanations can be effectively used as mini-lectures for different sections of the same course or in different semesters.

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BEING THERE OFTEN AND ON THE DOT, BUT NOT EVERYDAY ON TOP

#5 **Being STRICT with YOUR teaching time.** Defining the days when you are effectively teaching the course AND letting students know in the syllabus will help unlog a weekly schedule. For example, if you are teaching four courses (“A,” “B,” “C1” & “C2”), consider teaching “A” + “B” both on Mon. and Wed. and the two sections of “C” on Tue. and Thu., so that different courses do not overflow into the following day. In the example, Fri. can be set aside for grading, catching up and/or other tasks. Students need to know when to expect the instructor’s intervention. This will help in keeping down screen time for everyone.

#6 **Being “present” with TWO announcements weekly, per course, at the same hour on the established days** (irrespective of asynchr./ synchr.). This is the equivalent to the two-minute recap in every traditional face-to-face session when walking into the classroom: what’s due next week, what you’ll be covering this week ,etc. It’s needed in the real classroom, and even more important in an online environment.

#7 **Stating e-mail response times clearly.** For example, if you check e-mail at 9 am and again at 8 pm, and students send something at 9 pm they will know that they can’t expect an answer until the next day after 9 am.

THERE IS MORE THAN COURSE CONTENT: IT’S ALSO ABOUT Y’ALL

#8 **Creating TWO permanent discussion boards – one for INTRODUCTIONS and one for GENERAL QUESTIONS about course functioning or mechanics.** Introducing yourself **from DAY 1** and **checking the general questions boards EVERY designated day first thing** helps solving any outstanding questions and doubts, and will save time for everyone in the long run.

#9 **SETTING “office hours”, at least one weekday in the mornings AND one weekday in the afternoon.** This will allow that different personal schedules to be accommodated irrespective of asynch./synch. modes. Same hours for all courses can work!

#10 **FEEDBACK is CRUCIAL: let all students have theirs.** Feedback entails both learning and engaging opportunities for the student. Office hours can be used for individualized feedback but providing feedback to those assignments that are “central” to every unit is key to the learning process.

Being RESPECTFUL of THE STUDENT’S time. Allowing items to be visible to students **at least one week** before they are due and using *fixed days* for publication of tasks and for their submission (i.e., every Sunday by midnight) helps ensure that enough time can be set aside to complete the assignments. Posting homework or tasks for quick turnaround or improvising additional >> mandatory assignments is not conducive to timely submissions. The late submission feature in Blackboard can be enabled even if late work is not to be admitted, as long as this is stated so clearly (Blackboard will flag those for you to decide if exceptions are to be made, and it may save everyone plenty of frustrating e-mails).

Sending messages on unexpected days –except for emergencies– may be confusing. Sending messages on established days creates a sense of structured >> progression, and students can expect messages and directions on specific times and days. This will increase chances that messages are read early and thoroughly, rather than if they are sent arbitrarily throughout the week.

Overtaxing yourself with DAYLONG E-MAIL AVAILABILITY is not sustainable. >> Instead, being regular in keeping responses up to date according to the stated response times will save a lot of complaints that “the faculty doesn’t check e-mail!” – as everyone knows from the beginning when to expect responses.

Creating a sense of closeness by introducing yourself, encouraging students to do the same and, ALSO, having a dedicated discussion board for COURSE >> MECHANICS ONLY will spare e-mails to everyone. Many students will help each other to understand deadlines, submission formats etc., and this will reduce distractions in other discussion boards that are dedicated to content only.

>> **By using office hour slots for UNFORESEEN nonmandatory zoom sessions** that may be needed to “redirect” the group, review assignments going awry etc. students **will be able to PLAN AHEAD** and perhaps adjust, knowing that this will not happen at random times outside their availability windows.

>> **Feedback can be “planned”.** “Individualized” does not necessarily mean “completely different”. Tidbits of feedback may partially apply to different submissions in similar assignments or instruments. A set of 10 or 15 sentences can be combined and adjusted to produce short, meaningful paragraphs that address the student performance in an assignment and that will help them improve.