



## Best Practices for Online Teaching

The Best Online Instructional Practices Study is an ongoing study by UMUC's Institute for Research and Assessment (IRAHE, now renamed Office of Evaluation, Research, and Grants) that seeks to identify processes for effective teaching and learning online. The findings from the study support the underlying principles of this training course and provide an institution-wide context for the recommended use of certain instructional practices.

### Overall Findings

The overall findings of the Best Online Instructional Practices Study indicate that the following principles can have a positive impact on online teaching and learning:

1. Making learning goals and paths to them clear to students, e.g., giving a recommended order of use to students of course content and resources, including modules. Clearly stating the learning objectives in the syllabus, and spelling out a timeline for meeting the objectives are two strategies that help accomplish this.
2. Using deliberate practice, including multiple opportunities and different modes of learning until material and skills are mastered.
3. Providing prompt, constructive feedback.
4. Providing an optimal balance of challenge and support that is tailored to the individual students' readiness and potential. Some strategies that accomplish this are assessing students' skill at the beginning of the course and eliciting analysis from students about what worked or didn't work for them.
5. Eliciting active, critical reflection on the student's growing experience base. Encouraging students to question the validity of their own or others' reasoning and using role-playing are both strategies that help to accomplish this.
6. Linking inquiries to genuine problems or issues of high interest to the learners.
7. Developing learners' effectiveness as learners. This includes reinforcing course concepts through different types of resources and establishing relationships between topics and experience, and learning how to be most effective in the online environment.
8. Creating an institutional environment that supports and encourages inquiry. A key strategy for accomplishing this is emphasizing interaction between instructors and students as well as among students.



## Best Practices Related to the Design of Courses

Here are some correlations made by this study between students' expressed satisfaction and certain instructional strategies related to the design of courses:

High student satisfaction was met when:

1. The instructor spelled out a timeline for completing successive steps toward meeting the objectives.
2. The instructor prepared and required repeated practice on each objective of the course.
3. Instructors were prepared to provide support related to individual student needs.
4. Student skills were assessed at the beginning of the class.
5. Students were made aware of course resources, including the instructor's own expertise, learning modules, etc.
6. Grading criteria were clearly stated in the syllabus and clearly expressed, including through use of rubrics; reminders were provided on a regular basis; multiple forms of assessment were used.
7. Opportunities were provided for collaboration with others, including alternative explanations of experience, sharing of experience and perceptions, discussion, well designed group activities, etc.
8. Learning tasks were presented in terms of problem solving, not only as accumulated knowledge, and multiple approaches to problem solving were encouraged.
9. Students were encouraged to draw on their own experience as part of their learning and to incorporate their own goals into the work of the course.
10. The course was well organized and had a logical format.
11. The course lectures and discussions were supplemented by activities such as role-playing and simulations.
12. Students were encouraged to consider alternative interpretations of their own or others' experience.

## Correlations with Student Success and Retention

There were some strong correlations between withdrawal and passing rates and certain strategies. A lower withdrawal rate for students was associated with numbers 1, 7, 8, and 9. Higher passing rates were associated with 7, 8, 9, and 12.



## **Challenges**

Faculty indicated that they found certain strategies required more time and effort to prepare or were a challenge to carry out, including the design of research, case study analysis, and planning of weekly lectures. They also felt it was difficult to develop assignments in which critical thinking and the relating of topics to real world situations were highlighted. Some faculty found it particularly difficult to convey technical concepts in the online format.

## **Things to Consider During and After the Course**

Let's look at some findings as they relate to implementation, interaction, feedback, assessment, and faculty satisfaction.

### **Feedback and Grading**

Proficiency in providing feedback topped the list of all those faculty generated instructional practices that had an impact on the students' rating of overall faculty performance. Providing continuous feedback was also strongly correlated with lower student withdrawal rates. Faculty who said they were proficient in giving feedback on student performance, and in identifying errors, their causes, and how to correct them, had these instructional practices confirmed by students who expressed satisfaction with the amount of feedback given on assignments and projects.

When faculty made students aware of the traits of highly effective learners and encouraged them to question their own and others' assumptions, student satisfaction with feedback was also heightened. This instructional practice was strongly associated with higher student retention.

Providing support and a helping hand to students encountering difficulties were also highly appreciated, as were making students aware of remedial and educational support services for help. Students expressed satisfaction with instructors they perceived as accessible and concerned. This satisfaction was correlated with faculty reported practices such as offering students support through referrals to remedial services and resources, providing feedback, and encouraging opportunities to interact and share ideas and experiences with others in the course.



Here are some strategies shared by exemplary faculty as ways of providing effective feedback:

- Clearly expressing grading requirements through the use of matrices and rubrics to guide student work
- Responding to students as promptly as possible
- Providing students with individualized feedback
- Using feedback to provide encouragement and referrals to services
- Developing FAQs to respond to recurring questions
- Discouraging lateness and encouraging promptness
- Following up with students who are not actively participating via email reminders.

### **Interaction**

Dynamic interaction between students and the instructor and student-to-student is another focus of the Best Practices Study. Faculty reported that they found opportunities to encourage interaction in both the formal conferences (covering specific course objectives and content) as well as in more informal, less structured conferences (such as a CyberCafe or Open Forum. Posting an introduction and responding to others as the first assignment was often cited as a primary tool for setting the tone for interaction in a class. Faculty explained to students the importance of participation and stated the expectations, requirements, and grading criteria for participation.

Collaborative activities, whether in the Conference area or in Study Groups, worked best when students were given clear instructions on what was expected of them in a group interaction and when tips for minimizing problems were given. Opportunities for collaborative learning correlated strongly with passing rates for students.

Faculty reported that they facilitated learning by continuous reinforcement of course goals and objectives. Exemplary faculty also were conscious of developing students as learners by such practices as allowing students to reflect and interact with others in the conferences, by encouraging students to post questions about areas in which they are having difficulty, and by sharing their own experiences that are related to the subject matter. Such integration of the students' experience into the course can be used to stimulate critical thinking and analysis. Guest speakers can also provide additional stimulus for student learning.



Here is a summary of strategies for fostering interaction and facilitating learning from exemplary faculty:

- Make expectations for course participation and interaction clear.
- Provide students with a rubric for what good participation looks like.
- Provide study groups with tips for effective collaboration.
- Encourage and facilitate introductions at the start of the course.
- Post topics and questions that are interesting and thought-provoking.
- Identify and reiterate course goals throughout the course.
- Provide opportunities for students to ask questions.
- Ask students to reflect on what they have learned.

### **Faculty Satisfaction**

To remain effective in the online classroom, faculty must be organized, energetic, and have a visible presence in the classroom. Maintaining this level of performance and avoiding burnout is not always easy. Yet the exemplary faculty expressed great satisfaction with online teaching. Students themselves expressed higher levels of satisfaction when faculty were able to convey their own enthusiasm about the course and about the learning of their students. Exemplary faculty in the Best Practices Study shared their methods of maintaining enthusiasm and a high level of effectiveness.

These include:

- Develop and maintain organization, structure and a visible presence in the class.
- Make regular self-assessment of teaching methods and style.

The perception of faculty presence has been cited by many research studies as one of the most important determinants in student satisfaction with online learning. Faculty presence is most often experienced by students through continuous feedback during the course. But an interesting point is that maintaining this faculty presence is also a motivating, energizing element for the online instructor. Good organization and structure make it easier to accomplish the work of maintaining this presence.

We have previously mentioned the heightened self-awareness and exposure that online teaching can bring. This may sometimes seem intimidating, but it can also be regarded as a positive opportunity. Many online instructors note that online teaching has made them better instructors, whether online or in the face-to-face classroom.



## The Background of the Study

The study uses an educational model that builds on existing research and knowledge of effective teaching and learning practices in the traditional formats. The study uses a mixed method approach and is carried out in multiple phases.

In the **Pilot Phase**, initiated in 2001, an Instructional Practices Inventory questionnaire was devised to ask online faculty representing different disciplines and levels of courses to report how often, how vigorously, and with what perceived proficiency they used certain instructional principles and strategies in their class. Faculty were also asked to report what they considered their own most effective strategies, and identify those which were the most difficult or challenging functions and practices to carry out in online teaching.

**First Phase:** After identifying effective strategies as perceived by faculty, student classroom evaluation data was used to confirm or question what strategies the instructors reported that they had implemented in the classroom. Strategies emerged that were identified by both faculty and students as effective ones. In the first phase of the study, a randomly selected sample of 150 faculty members from Adelphi was invited to participate and 76% participated.

**Second Phase:** In the second phase, 30 faculty participants were interviewed from the Phase 1 pool to discover more about how teaching practices were implemented in the classroom. These faculty were chosen based in part on how much their stated strategies were confirmed by students in their classes. In other words, these faculty claimed that they did such and such in an effective manner and their student evaluation data indicated that students confirmed their instructors' behavior. There were also linkages made to both withdrawal and passing rates for students as a proxy for actual learning outcomes.

The upcoming **Third Phase** of the study is designed to measure the student learning outcomes as well as the satisfaction levels experienced by faculty and students in the courses in which the identified strategies have been successfully implemented.