

Expectations for Classroom Setup and Online Teaching

UMUC is committed to providing the highest-quality online education to its students. UMUC-sponsored research and evaluation data, including the Institute for Research and Assessment in Higher Education's (IRAHE) **Best Online Instructional Practices** and **Learning from Students' Course Evaluations** studies, as well as **Carswell and Fleming's Faculty Evaluation Study** support the following set of expectations for best practices in online teaching. While each school and many programs already provide checklists for classroom readiness and syllabus preparation, this document has integrated much of this material and presents a UMUC-wide consensus on a set of basic expectations and the rationale behind them.

UMUC is also committed to providing its faculty members with the technical, pedagogical, and administrative support in order to meet these expectations.

Before the start of the term

The following are visible to students in the WebTycho classroom, starting a month before classes begin, so faculty are encouraged to post these required items as soon as possible:

1. An **accurate e-mail address** (automatically the same for all WebTycho classes)
2. An **up-to-date biography** (automatically the same for all WebTycho classes)
3. A **welcoming initial class announcement** that tells students where to find materials, how to begin, and asks students to introduce themselves during the first week

Although no teaching will take place before the formal start date of the course, the following are visible to students in the WebTycho classroom starting one week before classes begin and should be ready by that date, if not mandated earlier by the school or program. If faculty must revise the syllabus after it has been made visible to students, they should announce that updates have been made. (Faculty may even want to highlight the changes by using red font, etc.)

1. **A detailed course syllabus** in accordance with departmental guidelines that includes (if not already provided)
 - **faculty contact information**, including where, when, and how students may contact the instructor and the timeframe for responding to them
 - **course goals and objectives**, if not already provided
 - **required text and other course materials**, if not already provided
 - **grading criteria**, including explicit expectations for participation and policy on late submissions

- **a brief description or listing of project assignments** and any extra credit opportunities
- **course schedule** (including all inclusive dates for weeks/units/modules and especially dates for all items due)
- **overall accuracy and attention to detail**, free of grammatical and spelling errors, and with all dates and information updated when re-using material from an earlier class

The syllabus is the main reference document that students print out and rely upon for information when they are offline as well as online. Therefore, it should be as complete and as accurate as possible.

The Graduate School's Carswell-Fleming study emphasizes that students rely on the syllabus to provide "a useful framework for planning study." The IRAHE findings demonstrate that student satisfaction is correlated with perceptions of faculty as well prepared and organized. Students react negatively to inaccurate information and syllabi containing many grammatical and spelling errors or incorrect dates.

Many students base their decision on whether to continue in a course on their review of the syllabus and are influenced by the level of clarity and professionalism exhibited in that document. Starting the first day of class, students who decide to drop the course section forfeit at least 25% of the tuition paid and are counted as withdrawing. This can reflect negatively on both the student and the course. Therefore, students need to be able to evaluate the course before it begins in order to make an informed commitment and to avoid late withdrawal penalties, or even worse, remain in the class by default.

2. **An introductory announcement**, welcoming students, detailing any necessary explanations about the layout of the classroom, and giving them directions about how to get started in the course.

It is not obvious to students in an online class how to begin and where to look for everything, even if they are familiar with the basic WebTycho layout. It is also important to set a welcoming tone for the course and to get students off to a good start, preventing feelings of disorientation which can lead to frustration in online courses.

3. **Classroom management/"housekeeping" information (this may appear in the syllabus or as part of an introductory announcement as well)** that includes

- the instructor's preferred file formats and labeling conventions for assignment submission, as well as the method for submission
- a short introductory document about the course as well as any required departmental information

4. **The first week's complete content and activities**, including faculty presentation material, reading or other content, and all assignments

Again, starting the first day of class, students who decide to drop the course section forfeit at least 25% of the tuition paid and are counted as withdrawing. This can reflect negatively on both the student and the course. Therefore, students need to be able to evaluate the course before it begins in order to make an informed commitment and to avoid late withdrawal penalties, or worse yet, remain in the class by default.

5. **Introductory and first week's conferences**, including

- a conference where the instructor and students can introduce themselves during the first days of the course or the first course of a cohort-based program like the MBA (this can be a separate conference or a thread in a casual "Cybercafé"-type area). The faculty member should post an introductory thread, introducing himself/herself and asking a few questions that will help students to get to know each other (For example—What do you hope to get out of this course? What do you already know about this course topic? What time zone do you log in from?) Please note that the uploading of student photos should always be optional.

The biography area is an informational, non-interactive feature designed to house a formal biography that usually details the credentials of the faculty member. The introductory thread is generally less formal and immediately sets the tone for interaction with the student. It provides a prompt for students to respond in kind.

- a conference for casual conversation or off-topic issues (such as a "Cybercafé," or "Water-cooler," or "Lounge")
- a faculty-monitored conference for student questions related to the course as a whole (not related to a specific week's questions)—this can be a separate conference such as Administrative Questions or can be included in the Cybercafé-type conference

Note: Some faculty like to maintain three separate conferences for the introductions, casual conversation lounge (Cybercafé, Watercooler, etc.) and administrative questions. Others combine two or all three of these into one conference. When deciding how to set up conferences, consider three factors—ease for later reference, clarity, and the ability for students to notice newly posted information.

- a content-related conference for the first week where students can post and interact—***the instructor should post the initial topic discussion threads***

When creating content and assignments for the online classroom, the following principles should be kept in mind:

1. **Learning activities** should be closely aligned with all course learning objectives, particularly those stated in the syllabus, and adequate practice should be provided to master them. Be explicit with students about the objectives for each assignment and also explain how the assignments are inter-related and build upon each other.

IRAHE research findings show that students acknowledge and express satisfaction with clear goals and objectives and appreciate when a detailed timeline and successive steps are set forth for meeting objectives. Also, findings indicate that students, especially undergraduates, require repeated practice on objectives in order to master them.

2. **Pacing and sequencing** of course activity (and content, to the extent that this applies) as well as clear deadlines are essential to help students manage their course workload.

IRAHE research findings indicate that students report high levels of satisfaction with faculty who display good organizational skills and a logical format. IRAHE recommends the following principle—“make learning goals and paths to them clear to students, e.g., provide learning modules/objects and a recommended order of their use in a course.”

3. **A variety of learning approaches** should be used, including whenever appropriate, small group and peer-to-peer activities, project-based assignments, case studies, role playing exercises and debates, problem-based learning, and multimedia-enriched presentations and resources. Through the use of collaborative work (class discussion, study groups, etc.) or public presentation of some assignments in the classroom, students are also able to develop a sense of a learning community.

When using Study Groups, faculty shouldn't assume that students know how to organize themselves or work collaboratively. Give detailed directions, guidelines, and due dates. Let students know ahead of time that you are monitoring the activity (ask students to do all work in the classroom or to cc you on emails) and that you are ready to jump in to assist if needed.

IRAHE research findings indicate that students, especially those at the graduate level, expressed satisfaction with the enhancement of the learning environment through the use of multimedia and other learning objects. Higher levels of student satisfaction and retention are correlated with activities involving collaboration and interaction, when well designed and structured, such as study groups, case studies, group projects and class discussions.

4. Online students expect opportunities to explore beyond the assigned textbook(s), including faculty commentary (especially when there are no provided modules), web resources, and multimedia. It's important to **integrate web, textbook, and library resources** into the course so that students feel these are intrinsically valuable and relevant to the course. Faculty should provide guidance as to the appropriate use and purpose of all course content.

IRAHE research findings indicate that students express dissatisfaction when there is too much material from many assigned textbooks and a resultant lack of comprehension of the material provided, or when textbooks simply go unused or are irrelevant to the course activities. Another practice to which students respond poorly is the encouragement of skimming by the instructor. Findings also show that students expect notes that are pertinent and insightful, weekly commentary and suggestions, and evidence of faculty expertise in the subject matter.

5. Incorporate **adult learning principles** into assignments and discussions, such as allowing students to apply their real-world experience to the course content.

IRAHE research findings indicate that students appreciate when subject matter is relevant to their interests and careers and when course content is applied to life situations. Higher retention rates are associated with such instructional practices.

6. Emphasize discussion questions and assignments that require **critical thinking** skills. Promote **active learning** strategies.

IRAHE research findings show students express satisfaction with instruction that encourages them to look at issues from many different angles, and affords them the option of advanced challenges. Encouraging students to question assumptions made by others or themselves is a strategy associated with higher retention rates. IRAHE findings recommend eliciting active, critical reflection on students' growing experience and providing challenges tailored to individuals' readiness and potential.

During the term

The following are essential practices for running a successful online classroom:

1. **Post materials and conference topic threads on a pre-announced and consistent schedule**, for example, each Sunday before the Monday on which each week of the course begins. This helps busy adult students manage their time.

Time management is critical to the success of online learning. IRAHE findings indicate that students expect instructors to use a logical format and to be well organized.

2. **Create at least one focused conference for each week or unit of the course.** Provide deadlines and clear guidelines for conference participation so that students are able to participate as a unified group. Faculty may even want to make the conference "read-only" after the due dates. When appropriate, use conferences for presenting individual student projects, group work, weekly summaries by students, demonstrations of problem solving, or for other activities beyond "discussion."

UMUC students expect a shared classroom experience, not just self-paced, independent study. The conference area in WebTycho provides a forum for discussion of each unit or important topic in the course but its use need not be limited to that activity—it is also an excellent venue for many types of shared activities. Interaction can be faculty to student or student to student in nature.

3. **Start initial conference topic threads for each weekly or unit-based conference.**

As part of the faculty's facilitation of class discussion, this serves to encourage and stimulate discussion and reinforces the focus of the week's content.

4. **Facilitate but don't dominate the discussions. Ask follow-up questions and redirect to elicit responses from classmates.** Faculty should be "visible" (even if in a minor way) in each week's conference to let students know that they are "listening."

Interactivity means that discussion should not simply be one way or solely directive in nature. IRAHE findings show that students appreciate interaction with other students as well as with faculty. Students also appreciate when faculty allow for, encourage, and respect students' perspectives.

5. **Participate actively in the class conferences** (including the monitoring or participating in study group conferences as needed) a minimum of three, but preferably four times or more per week.

Students don't know that a faculty member is reading their postings unless there is some indication in writing on the part of the faculty member. Frequent appearances, however short, do more to establish the instructor's presence than do those at less frequent intervals.

The Carswell and Fleming Faculty Evaluation Study concluded that faculty members have to work especially hard in online courses to enhance their presence in the eyes of their students. IRAHE's Best Practices study shows a strong correlation between student retention and high levels of faculty feedback and interaction.

6. **Provide dated class announcements at least weekly in the online classroom.** Previous announcements should also remain available somewhere in the classroom. If faculty remove announcements, they should always archive them in a conference for reference and to maintain a complete record of the course. Announcements can be used to remind students of due dates, to let students know that a new conference or lecture has been posted, provide encouragement and positive feedback, etc. Use emails primarily to repeat or reinforce class announcements.

This is a technique that assists students with time management. IRAHE findings indicate students appreciate timely reminders.

7. **Respond to all student inquiries within 48 hours**, even if it is just to let the student know that the instructor is working on the issue and will get back to the student in due time. If the instructor will be absent for any period of time, she or he should indicate the duration to the students.

IRAHE findings emphasize that students expect faculty to be accessible and provide timely feedback. Responsiveness of this nature also contributes to the overall sense of instructor presence.

8. **Organize class activities so that they take place primarily in the online classroom**, rather than by e-mail, phone, or mail.

This serves to reinforce the shared classroom experience over the independent study mode and contributes to the building of a learning community. Students are able to exchange ideas with peers and the faculty can more effectively manage workload and be attentive to students. It also enhances the archive value of the online classroom in case of later disputes.

9. **Send a personal email as a friendly reminder to students who are not actively participating in the class.**

Sometimes students lose track of time in online courses and some positive encouragement can help keep them on task.

10. **Provide resources and referrals (both UMUC-based and external) as a way to offer personalized support and demonstrate concern.** Examples include referrals to services such as the Effective Writing Center, Information and Library Services, Advising, as well as appropriate books or Web resources.

UMUC students come with a wide range of different academic backgrounds and needs. Personalization is particularly appreciated in the context of an online classroom. IRAHE findings are that high levels of student satisfaction are correlated with faculty offering support tailored to individual needs, including making students aware of resources and referrals for remediation. Such practices were interpreted by students as demonstrating concern for their progress.

The following are essential practices related to effective feedback and grading in the online classroom:

1. **Provide adequate feedback on all assignments and pay special attention to providing adequate feedback on the first major assignment.** Instructor feedback will help set expectations for students about future assignments.
2. **Assignments on which future assignments depend should be returned as quickly as possible** so students have plenty of time to make corrections based on your feedback that will carry over into the next assignment (e.g., annotated bibliography that will support a major paper)
3. **Provide feedback that suggests areas for improvement and growth** as well as reinforcement and acknowledgement, pointing students to possible use of what's learned in forthcoming assignments.

IRAHE findings confirm that students desire proactive feedback and Carswell and Fleming emphasize the need for useful feedback and guidance in online classes. IRAHE findings show that student satisfaction with grading was tied to the ability of the instructor to offer consistent, in-depth feedback that not only identified errors, but also their causes, and ways to correct them. IRAHE studies also show an association between lower withdrawal rates and regular feedback.

4. **Clearly state the criteria or create rubrics** to manage student expectations on grading.

IRAHE findings show that students express dissatisfaction when grading does not appear to be systematic. Rubrics are also useful tools for managing faculty workload.

5. **Comments and grades for individual work should be placed in the Gradebook in a timely manner.** On major assignments (e.g., term papers, exams), students should receive their graded assignments back within 10 days.

IRAHE findings show that students desire weekly grades and timely feedback. When faculty use the Gradebook, students are able to track their own progress. Use of the Gradebook ensures that there is a clear, auditable record of the student's performance.

6. **For group projects, students should be graded in some measure on individual contribution** as well as for the group as a whole

IRAHE findings demonstrate that students expect substantial focus on individual work within the group in order to be graded more fairly and correctly

7. **Make participation in the online classroom a significant portion of the grade** (generally, 10-40% for discussion based or classroom based activities, depending on the course objectives and whether or not some posted assignments also count toward participation), and ensure that part of the participation grade is for responses and interaction with classmates, not just with the instructor. Discussion should be focused and task-oriented. Faculty should clearly communicate their precise guidelines and explain what constitutes participation.

Students take their cue from what faculty deem the decisive factors in grading. If discussion and other activities that are carried out in the online classroom do not comprise a significant portion of the grade, students will be less attentive to them. Online learning, even when asynchronous, depends on the back and forth communication with both classmates and faculty. This is an element that differentiates it from a correspondence course or other forms of independent study.

8. **Use a framework in which grades are distributed over a variety of assignments** rather than establish grades that are heavily weighted in favor of just one or two exams or deliverables, especially when these are due only late in the term.

IRAHE findings show that students are dissatisfied when grades are too heavily weighted in favor of one or two elements, such as the final exam or group work.

After the term ends

1. **Final grades must be submitted within 72 hours** after the official course end date or within 72 hours of a proctored exam packet to UMUC's Integrated Faculty Information System (IFIS).

In order to register for the next semester, many students are dependent on grades received for the current semester. There is an additional 24 hour electronic processing delay after grades are submitted. Students need the information by this time to make choices about their continued academic progress and to avoid late penalties.

Additionally, there are often economic reasons, in that tuition assistance—be it from the military, a private employer, or through financial aid — is often contingent on grades being received by a certain date (as is, in most cases, continuation of this assistance).

2. **Any students receiving a grade of incomplete ("I") who need continued access to the classroom after the archiving period will need to be manually rostered in by the faculty.** Faculty are still responsible after the term ends for any students who receive a grade of incomplete.

3. Make regular self-assessments of teaching methods and style.

Online teaching, by providing a nearly complete record of the course, enhances the faculty member's ability to reflect on the effectiveness of methods and approaches. IRAHE findings are that regular self-assessment by faculty helps maintain faculty enthusiasm for the course—an enthusiasm that will carry over to students.

4. Set an example for your students of commitment to life-long learning—participate in faculty development workshops to improve your teaching and technology skills and in professional development activities to keep current in your field.

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