

Best Practices for Online Instructors

BEFORE THE TERM BEGINS

1. GET TO KNOW YOUR LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (LMS)

- ✓ **EXPLORE LMS TRAINING CLASSES ON YOUR COLLEGE CAMPUS OR ONLINE:** Most colleges offer LMS training for instructors, and there are professional organizations for educators that also offer these types of classes.
- ✓ **COLLEAGUES:** Your colleagues are a great resource to help you get up to speed on your LMS. You might be able to use an existing course from a colleague and modify it to meet the needs of your course and students.
- ✓ **SET UP YOUR CLASS LMS EARLY:** Create and begin customizing your LMS as early as possible. Explore the different options available in your LMS.

2. DETERMINE ASSESSMENT METHODS

- ✓ **TYPES OF EVALUATION METHODS:** Determine the types of student activities and evaluation methods you'll use for your class: *written assignments, discussion board posts, group activities, quizzes, tests*, etc. There are many different options available in each LMS, but you don't have to use every one. In the syllabus, be very specific about how students will be evaluated in your course (see #3 below).
- ✓ **Discussion board posts:** To make these assignments meaningful, use questions/topics that encourage students to critically think about and apply what they are learning. Determine whether students respond only to your writing prompt or also to responses of other students. In most LMSs, you can require students to make their own discussion board post before they can see other students' posts, which encourages individual thinking and responses.
- ✓ **TOTAL POINTS V. WEIGHTED GRADES:** Decide whether you'll use total points or weighted grades. Total points tend to be easier to use, and students usually understand this grading method better. Weighted grades are useful to give a certain category of evaluation (e.g., exams) more influence on the overall grade than another category (e.g., quizzes).
- ✓ **USE THE LMS GRADE BOOK (IF POSSIBLE):** Using the LMS grade book will save you time so you don't have to re-enter grades in a spreadsheet or grade book program. Also, your students are more apt to check their grades regularly if you use the grade book in the LMS. Encourage students to check their grades at least once a week.

3. CREATE A VERY ORGANIZED AND DETAILED SYLLABUS

- ✓ **COURSE SCHEDULE AND DUE DATES:** Create a course schedule that provides specific due dates for assignments. Clearly communicate in your syllabus whether or not you'll accept late work and how late work is graded (e.g., full credit, half credit, 10% per day penalty).
- ✓ **EVALUATION SCALES AND RUBRICS:** Either in the syllabus or on a separate document, provide grading criteria and/or evaluation rubrics. The more clarity you provide up front about how you evaluate student work, the fewer questions/complaints you'll have throughout the term.
- ✓ **COMMUNICATION:** Be specific about how you will communicate with students (e.g., email, discussion board posts). Also, be specific about how you would like students to communicate with you. Set realistic communication expectations for your students (e.g., "I will answer emails within 24-48 during the week. I do not answer emails on the weekend."). See #8 below for more information about communication.
- ✓ **IMPORTANT DATES:** Include holidays and other important campus-wide dates (e.g., last day to drop, petition for graduation, final exams, etc.).
- ✓ **COURSE MATERIALS:** Clearly list the required and optional materials needed for the course. If using online resources, explain how to create/set up student account. Some online resources have a 14-21 day trial period for students waiting for financial aid; explain this to students if this option is available.

4. ANTICIPATE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS

- ✓ **COMMON STUDENT QUESTIONS:** If you have previously taught your course in an on-site format, what student questions do you normally answer? Think through the information you cover in an on-site course and anticipate the questions students might have in an online course. If you've never taught this course before, spend time with a colleague picking his or her brain about potential student questions.
- ✓ **CREATE HANDOUTS AND VIDEOS:** For topics that require more detailed information and don't fit neatly and succinctly in the syllabus or course LMS, create handouts or videos. If using handouts, include plenty of visuals to instruct and guide students. You can create a quick video explaining how to accomplish a course task or answer a common question. Handouts and videos can be uploaded to your course LMS, and you can refer students to these supplemental resources.
- ✓ **CREATE A FAQ (FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS) AREA:** Most LMSs will let you create a discussion board where you can post frequently asked questions and responses to those questions. It's probably best to not allow students to respond to FAQs but rather keep these informational only (one-way communication; instructor to student).

5. USE STUDENT VIEW OR A SAMPLE STUDENT ACCOUNT TO TEST THE CLASS LMS

- ✓ **SEE WHAT STUDENTS SEE IN THE LMS:** Most LMSs have a student view option, which gives the instructor the ability to see how the LMS looks from a student's perspective. Also, most LMSs have a sample student who can be added to your course; you can log in as a student to your course. Be very familiar with what students see in the class LMS; this usually differs from what the instructor sees.
- ✓ **COMPLETE ASSIGNMENTS AS A STUDENT:** The better you understand how your course LMS looks and feels, the better you'll be able to answer student questions. Log in to the LMS as a student or use student view and take a quiz/test, complete and submit an assignment, post to a forum/discussion board, etc., so you know how to interact with each of the different type of activities students are required to complete.

6. CREATE AN ORIENTATION FOR THE COURSE

- ✓ **ONLINE OR ON-SITE ORIENTATION:** Determine whether you will have an online or on-site orientation (if an on-site orientation is an option). Ask colleagues what they do for their orientations for online courses.
- ✓ **ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS:** As mentioned above in #4, anticipate questions that might arise and use the orientation as an opportunity to answer questions before the term begins. Use a combination of handouts, videos, and quizzes that students need to read/watch/take before starting the regular course assignments.
- ✓ **CREATE LIST OF ORIENTATION TASKS:** Whether in the LMS, in an email, or on a handout, provide students with a detailed list of what they are required to do to complete the orientation. Students must complete this list of tasks before completing regular course assignments. Some LMSs will allow you to lock and release content so it only becomes available after a student completes a prerequisite assignment.
- ✓ **BEGIN CONTACTING STUDENTS EARLY AND REGULARLY:** Send an email to students a couple of weeks before the term begins detailing what is required to complete the orientation and the due date. Email students who have not completed the orientation a reminder every 3-4 days until the orientation deadline.
- ✓ **SET A REALISTIC ORIENTATION DEADLINE:** Set a realistic date for students to complete the orientation. Drop students who don't complete the orientation by the due date.

THROUGHOUT THE TERM

7. GIVE PROMPT FEEDBACK

- ✓ **GRADE AND RETURN ASSIGNMENTS PROMPTLY:** Feedback is best when it is given and received in a timely manner. It's very frustrating for students to wait a week or two to receive back an assignment or quiz. Do your best to grade and return assignments quickly, which positively contributes to the learning process. Quizzes and tests in an LMS are typically automatically graded. If you use short answer or essay questions, you will need to manually grade these.
- ✓ **UPDATE GRADES AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK:** If using an LMS, many grades are automatically populated in the LMS grade book. If you manually enter some grades, do this at least once a week.
- ✓ **Model effective discussion board feedback:** Provide prompt and valuable feedback to students' posts to make these assignments effective learning and evaluation tools. Doing so also models to students how to write meaningful responses to their classmates' posts. Without prompt and targeted feedback from the instructor, discussion board posts lose their effectiveness, and students will not take these assignments seriously.
- ✓ **TRAIN STUDENTS TO REVIEW FEEDBACK AND CHECK GRADES:** From the beginning of the term, encourage students to read all feedback on graded assignments and check their grades at least once a week. This helps to give students ownership of their learning in your course.

8. COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

- ✓ **SEND WEEKLY UPDATES:** In an online course, it's important for students to receive regular communication from their instructor. Send out a weekly update that provides an overview of upcoming assignments, quizzes, tests, projects and any additional information to help students be successful in your course. It's best to do this on the same day each week so students become accustomed to receiving and reading your weekly update messages. You can use either email for these weekly updates, or use discussion board posts on the LMS where students automatically receive these posts as emails.
- ✓ **ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO READ THEIR EMAIL DAILY:** Even though texting and social media is widely used by college students today, much, if not most, communication in educational settings is done using email. Encourage students to check and read their email every day. It is also a good idea for students to use one email account for education and a different one for personal or business communication.
- ✓ **RESPOND PROMPTLY TO STUDENTS' EMAILS:** Set a couple times each day to respond to students' email. Prompt responses keep students engaged in the course. As mentioned in #3 previously, set realistic communication guidelines with your students (e.g., "I will answer emails within 24-48 during the week. I do not answer emails on the weekend.>").
- ✓ **THREE BEFORE ME:** Encourage students' questions but also train students to be resourceful. I use "Three before me" with my students. Before a student contacts me with a question, I require him or her to look for the answer from three different sources (e.g., syllabus, textbook, handouts, FAQs, weekly update emails, etc.). "Three before me" tremendously reduces the number of student questions and teaches students to be resourceful.

9. UPDATE CONTENT REGULARLY

- ✓ **HANDOUT AND VIDEOS:** Post any handouts, videos, or other resources you email to students on the course LMS, so students can refer back to these when needed.
- ✓ **DISPLAYING LMS CONTENT:** Your LMS can easily become cluttered and an information dump, which makes it challenging for students to find the information they need. You have to ability to display and hide content on the LMS. Use this feature to hide content the students no longer need. Display content as students need it. Most LMSs allow you to set open/start and close/end dates on content.

10. PLAN FOR THE NEXT TERM

- ✓ **CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:** We should always be trying to improve our courses. Use the *Plan, Implement, and Evaluate* continuous-improvement cycle to make changes for subsequent terms. Honestly evaluate different student activities and evaluation methods used during the term. Keep a running list of changes to make for next term: orientation information, writing topics, handouts, common course questions, quiz and test questions, etc.
- ✓ **UPDATE FAQs:** As mentioned above in #4, a FAQs area in your LMS can be used to answer common student questions, and it trains students to be resourceful and look for answers to their questions. If you receive the same question a couple of times, post the question and your response in the FAQs area. Keep this area updated throughout the term. And, you can use the same FAQs next term to save time.
- ✓ **ALWAYS BE LEARNING:** Continually be on the lookout for new, creative, and exciting ways to engage students and enhance learning.
 - Look for emerging technologies that will enhance your course.
 - Take a couple colleagues out for a cup of coffee and brainstorm successes and failures in their online courses.
 - Take an on-campus or online course to learn new and effective tools for your online learning toolbox.
 - Survey students at the end of the term to get their opinion about the most effective learning activities in both your course and other courses they've taken.