

Best Practices for Effective Online Teaching

The following are best practices for teaching online, which provide support and guidance for implementing the Great Plains IDEA Principles for Effective Online Teaching. Using these practices can help faculty and students have an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience.



Principle 1: Student-Faculty Contact

Regular student-faculty contact is important to develop a relationship with students, which can be challenging in the online environment. These communication practices can help create an interactive and engaging learning environment for faculty and students.

- Faculty can put policies in place describing types of communication they will use when working with students. The policies may outline when different modes of communication should and will be used and how communication should be handled. For example, you may explain how public discussion forums in the classroom should and should not be used, and explain that professional and civil communication should be used at all times.
- Standards can be set for the amount of time necessary for the instructor to respond to e-mails. For example, many instructors make it a policy to respond to e-mails within 2 days of receiving them, or within 24 hours during the work week. Faculty should try to set and adhere closely to these standards. Consider outlining this in the course syllabus or course information page.
- Proactive course management strategies can be practiced. These strategies include, but are not limited to, posting in the online course regularly to demonstrate an active instructor presence, communicating and reminding students of upcoming deadlines or changes in the course schedule, and making course progress adjustments where and when necessary.
- Faculty can connect with their students by sharing personal information about themselves while still maintaining professionalism. For example, sharing information about your background, interests, and hobbies can help students see you as a “real person” and not just a name on a syllabus. Faculty can also create short videos where they can put a “face to a name” and help to demonstrate instructor presence.
- Videos can be used in all areas of the classroom to help faculty connect with students. This includes in announcements, instructional modules, assignments, discussion boards, and supplementary material.



Principle 2: Cooperation Among Students

Faculty can help create a supportive and cooperative environment in the online classroom. This can be achieved through various strategies.

- Faculty should try to create opportunities for students to spend quality time engaging with one another and the course content. This will allow students to feel connected and gain a deeper understanding of course content. This can be done through personal introductions, open forums, using video, and small group discussions or projects.
- Requiring participation in various course activities, such as discussion forums and group projects, which involve content can spark active learning, personal meaning-making, and debate.
- Students can be allowed to give feedback on the work of their peers. This can help students to learn from each other and also provide an opportunity to further engage learners in course content.



Principle 3: Active Learning

Students in online classes may feel their participation and learning is more passive or individualized than students who are engaged in face-to-face classes. Faculty can follow these best practices to help promote engagement and active learning.

- Allow students opportunities to present their work. Often when student's complete projects, only the instructor sees the final product. Providing an opportunity for students to share their work and discuss projects and assignments (similar to class presentations) can help create more opportunity for active learning.
- Faculty can use technology to facilitate active learning and engagement. For example, synchronous live chat sessions can allow students the chance to discuss course content, analyze material, and participate in problem solving in real time. These sessions can also be recorded and shared with the class so those who cannot attend can have access to this activity.

Principle 4: Prompt and Meaningful Feedback

Feedback is critical when working with students in the online environment and can assist in facilitating learning and engagement. Two types of feedback, information and acknowledgment, can be used by faculty.

- Information feedback can be used to provide an answer to a question, comments, or a grade for an assignment or test. This feedback should be meaningful, use clear and concise language and be an opportunity to take advantage of “teachable moments”.
- Acknowledgment feedback is used to confirm that an assignment or question has been received and that a response will be made soon. Students often worry that you have not received their assignment or have not seen questions sent or posted. A quick acknowledgement with a plan for detailed follow-up at a later time when the assignment, question, or e-mail is received will prevent time-consuming e-mails later.
- When the instructor gets too busy for personal communication, some comments can be sent to the entire class. Obviously grades need to be communicated to each student personally.

Principle 5: Deadlines and Consistent Patterns of Course Activities

Being successful in an online class requires faculty and students to juggle multiple responsibilities and to manage their time. Providing deadlines and consistent patterns of course activities can assist both the instructor and students in doing this effectively.

- Setting regular deadlines and patterns of course activities help busy students avoid procrastination and encourages regular communication with the instructor and other students. A pattern of work can help both the instructor and student manage their time.
- Consistency in deadlines and course activities also allows students to understand that although they can complete their work when it works for them, there will be a defined schedule of operation from start to finish.
- Frequent, low-stakes assignments, especially at the beginning of the course, can get the students into the habit of working on the course regularly rather than in infrequent bursts. This can also give students more confidence than infrequent, high-stakes assignments.
- Faculty should try to communicate expectations of how much time will be spent working on the course each week. Making this clear early on can help students to plan for the remainder of the course.

Principle 6: High Expectations

Faculty should try to communicate their expectations to students clearly and continually throughout the course.

- High expectations can be communicated through challenging assignments or discussions and examples of good work. Expectations can be detailed in the course description and in individual assignment instructions.
- Giving praise for exemplary student work encourages other students to work on that same level.
- Expectations can also be communicated in assignment feedback. To this end, evaluation should be based on the quality of work versus the quantity. Consider using rubrics with both qualitative and quantitative components to clarify expectations and offer thorough feedback.



Principle 7: Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

Every student has different strengths and different ways of learning. Implementing these best practices can help to highlight the diverse talents of students.

- Instructors can provide guidelines for a project but allow students to choose a topic that interests them. This practice gives students a sense of control in their education and encourages more diverse points of view. Another option is to provide students with a topic, and give them several ways to communicate their knowledge such as through a blog, podcast, a pamphlet, etc...
- Allowing students to take the lead in class discussions and assignments can provide them an opportunity to showcase their knowledge and innovative approaches to understanding the material.
- Ensuring all course materials are accessible is important for all students and can help avoid the need for special accommodations.



Principle 8: Course Quality

Whether teaching face-to-face or online, faculty always have the opportunity to assess their approach to teaching and facilitating learning. Instituting best practices for quality assurance can provide a better experience for students and faculty.

- Regularly monitoring the online classroom and checking for issues can reduce the time required to address system failures, unclear instruction, and student frustrations during the class and from semester to semester.
- Faculty should work to identify new technologies or approaches used in online classes, and use student feedback to make improvements, which can enhance overall course design, instructor presence, and delivery resulting in a more robust and higher quality teaching and learning experience.
- Check to ensure there is alignment between course objectives, assessments, activities, materials, and technology is present.
- When possible, provide direct links and information to student services and resources such as disability support services, writing centers, and technical support.

References

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