Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses

Some Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses, based on prior experience with teaching online courses through MLC and student feedback from various courses.

Length of lessons

Weekly or every 2 weeks. In EDU9502: Designing and Constructing Online Courses, everyone learned that course material should be "chunked" into small segments within a lesson and that lessons should normally be only one or two weeks in length. Students prefer new lessons beginning on the same day of the week throughout the course.

Which day of the week should a lesson begin/end?

During the fall and spring terms, most students in the graduate program are teaching full-time, which gives them little time to work on their grad course on school days. Therefore, they complete the bulk of their work for a given lesson over the weekend. For this reason, many of them indicated that in the **spring and fall** they prefer that new lessons begin on a **Wednesday** and end on a **Tuesday** since it places the weekend in the middle of the lesson time period.

However, **during the summer term**, they prefer that lessons run from the typical **Sunday** through **Saturday** (or Monday through Sunday) since they prefer to do the bulk of their work during the week and not on the weekends. Some instructors simply prefer to run courses from Sunday through Saturday even during the school year, which is okay. Ultimately, it is up to the course instructor.

Preparing to teach a course during the 8-week summer term

When transforming a regular semester-long online course (15-16 weeks) and teaching it in the summer term (8 weeks), there is no need to redo or combine any of your lessons. The idea is to simply take each two-week period from the fall or spring semester offering and cover the same material in one week in the summer term. For most instructors that means they cover two lessons per week in the summer, often running one lesson from Sunday-Wednesday and the other lesson from Wednesday-Saturday. (Remember, in the summer term most students prefer a Sunday-

Saturday "week", as explained earlier.)

Keep all students working through the course at the same pace

Typically, some students prefer to work ahead while others seem to wait to do things at the last minute. In an online course, it is important that students are working on the group aspects of the lesson at the same time. One good method to attempt to satisfy both extremes is to make the "lesson guide sheet" document visible to students about a week prior to the start of the new lesson, but don't make the posting or submission areas visible until the official start date of the lesson. If following a "Wednesday-Tuesday weekly format," some instructors make the next week's lesson guide sheet available on a Friday evening, so students that want to work ahead can use the weekend to do so, but they can not submit their work until the lesson officially begins on the following Wednesday. (Also, see the sections on Post due dates... and Group discussion forum due dates below.)

Post due dates to inform and pace student work

A schedule of activities can be posted in a variety of ways. Some instructors provide a document listing all of the activities and the due dates at the start of the course. Others provide general dates for lessons in the Moodle heading areas of topical blocks, and specific activity due dates within the instructions for the activity, or in the activity set up in Moodle. Others make use of the Moodle calendar. Many instructors use more than one method. If your lesson is spread across more than a week, it is wise to make some activities due before the end of the lesson so students cannot save everything for the last minute. (Also, see the suggestion below on Group discussion forum due dates.)

Group discussion forum due dates

Set a posting due date for the original contribution to a forum, and then a later posting due date for replies. For example, if a new weekly lesson starts on Wednesday, some instructors set a due date of Saturday for the initial post and a due date of Tuesday for all reply posts. This forces all students in a group to make their initial contribution to the forum by the middle of the weekend, which allows those that want to take care of their reply posts obligations on the second half of the weekend and without having to stay up late into the evening to do so.

Provide a "Student Expectations" document

Different online instructors have different expectations of students. It is very helpful to your students if you post your expectations of them at the very start of the course. It is also a good idea to include what students can expect from the instructor!

Use the Moodle Grade Book

Students are used to seeing grades, and comments, on various activities posted to the grade book in Moodle. The current grade book can accommodate many different methods of grading. However, if you have not used it before or recently, getting it set up can be confusing. However, Rachel is always able, willing, and happy to assist you in setting up your grade book and understanding how it works. Simply let her know how you would like grades to be calculated and she will set up the grade book for you!

Use "Choice" for students to select activities

The "choice" activity feature in Moodle is very good at allowing (forcing) students to select from a list of possible choices for a given activity so you do not have more than one student selecting the same project or activity in a given lesson. It can also be used to get student feedback (vote) on a particular question.

Use "Groups" for discussion work

Small groups are often used in discussion forums to greatly cut down the amount of reading and posting that students need to do during the course. At the end of a group activity, it is a good practice to set the group setting to "Visible groups" so all participants will be able to view the discussion that occurred within other groups. When the change is made, it is a good idea to add some text in the forum introduction such as: *Please note: The setting in this forum has been changed from "Separate Groups" to "Visible Groups." To see the work from a different group, select the group by using the "Visible groups" button located below*. Generally, viewing or reading these additional posts should be optional.

In Moodle, it is less confusing to students to have them in only one group at a time. If students are members of more than one group at a time, students need to exercise additional care so that they post to the correct group for each activity. They need to specify the correct group prior to selecting the "*Add a new discussion topic*" button.

There is not a perfect group size, but groups of four or five seem to have worked well in discussion forums for many instructors. If one person is late in posting, the others still have two or three different people they can make their reply post to.

Grading discussion forums

It is important that students understand the grading rubric that is being used for discussion forum work. A convenient way to assign points is to use the "Sum of ratings" setting in the forum setup, and then assign a certain number of points for the initial post and a certain number of points for each reply post. It is also good to include a general message in the forum introduction area so students understand the rating being used, such as *(This forum is worth 10 points. You will receive up to 5 points for your initial post and up to 3 for each reply post.)*

Use the "Folder" resource to allow students to see work produced by others

If you want to share work produced by class participants with others in the class, the "Folder" resource is the best way to accomplish this.

On the course homepage, create a "Folder" resource and then upload student files into it. (You may zip student files into a single file, upload the zipped file into the folder, and then unzip.)

Instructor participation/presence

It is important to let students know that you are actively reading their work and checking in on the course on a nearly daily basis. This is especially important in discussion forums. Please refer to the guidance on Regular and Substantive Interactions for more information.

Be consistent in how materials are to be turned in

Most instructors make use of the assignment activity upload features in Moodle to receive student work and provide comments back to the students. Others might use a different method. There is no one method that needs to be followed, but it is good to be consistent throughout the course.

Scanned files

Scanned pages from books should be scanned directly in a PDF (not jpg) format with multiple pages combined together in a single document. This will greatly reduce the overall file size, make the text and/or images clearer, and be much easier for the students to work with. (Feel free to contact Rachel for assistance.)

Lesson Feedback after each lesson/unit

Waiting until the end of the course for summative feedback is not as useful as gathering feedback after each lesson. You can use the **Feedback** activity at the end of each lesson where students are asked to complete 3 statements;

The most useful thing in the lesson was…

The most challenging part of the lesson was…

The lesson could be improved by...

Although this is still gathering information after the fact, such feedback can be very useful information for the next time the course is offered and sometimes even useful for making adjustments to future lessons in the current offering of the course.

Faculty assistance

Many useful screencasts and documents have been placed here on KnightHelp. Also, feel free to contact Rachel for assistance.

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