Online Teaching & Learning Collaborative (O-TLC)

Frequently Asked Questions: Teaching & Learning Online

How does the student learning process differ in an online classroom?

Online learning requires that the student be able to work more autonomously, be well organized and self-motivated. This is essential in their ability to manage course work, meet due dates for written assignments, forum posts and replies. Online learners will rely heavily on various technology and learning platforms to complete and submit their assigned work. Faculty also utilize these tools to assess work, assign grades, and provide consistent and frequent feedback to the student. The key is to have the student see you as being "present" in the virtual classroom, just as they would in a traditional setting.

Is there a significant difference in the methods used to communicate with students in an online versus face-to-face classroom environment?

Yes, there is a significant difference, in-that students predominantly need to rely on the use of the telephone, email, or an online communication platform, such as Zoom or Skype. Depending on the availability of the student or faculty, the ability to ask or respond to a question in real-time may be delayed. Student-to-student and faculty-to-student conversations will generally occur via forum discussions, text or email. Utilizing video chat applications, such as Zoom or Skype, helps to alleviate the disconnectedness students and faculty may experience when working in an online environment. The appropriate use of technology can also enhance online learning experiences.

What should I expect relative to student-to-student and/or faculty-to-student interactions?

While there is the potential for diminished interpersonal interactions in a virtual classroom environment, there are a number of ways to ensure the student experiences a rich and supportive learning environment. As mentioned, being "present" in the classroom on a regular basis to answer questions, respond to posts, provide feedback, and the like, all create a sense of community. Effective online teaching requires the faculty to be a participant in the classroom, rather simply monitoring for compliance. As with your students, the more you put into your course, the better the overall outcome will be for both you and your students.

Is student management in an online virtual classroom different from that of a traditional face-to-face one?

Unfortunately, some students believe that online classes require less effort and reduced academic standards. However, management of virtual classrooms carry the same relative requirements of performance, and students and faculty need to effectively manage their time to ensure that all work is completed and reviewed within the established timeframes. Some students may struggle to submit their work on time and realize too late that they are not able to catch up. Faculty presence and timely interaction are key in helping students manage their workload. Much of the virtual learning occurs through the use of dynamic discussions forums and student interactions. Students who do not log in on a regular basis may miss critical information needed for later assignments. Holding students accountable is no different in a virtual setting than it is in a live classroom setting. Early support and intervention that follows school policies, referring students to academic advisor (if needed), providing individual prompts, and general course reminders all help support learners to have a successful outcome.

Here are a few tips, tricks and strategies that may prove helpful as you teach in an online environment:

1. Think about how to utilize online learning platforms and applications creatively. Options such as live chats, video presentations, video overview of the week's assignments, along with interactive discussion boards, virtual teams, etc. can be very helpful in creating community.

2. Teaching in an online "click" versus a traditional classroom "brick" course can feel very challenging, however, both maintain a high level of academic quality. The main differences are in the delivery, management and use of available technology and online learning tools. Remember: quality teaching is still quality teaching, regardless of the format used!

3. Encourage your students to treat the online classroom the same way they would a traditional one. Urge your students to interact with each other using the available online applications. Some faculty create specific chat rooms or forums for students to ask questions in or request clarification on a particular assignment. The importance of providing a basic set of rules for interactions and decorum is also key.

4. Teaching online creates multiple opportunities to interact with your students in a creative and fun way. While there are some advantages to live, face-to-face discussions, also realize that you have the same options to do so in an online classroom. Doing so will help preserve and support your ability to foster a collaborative and supportive learning environment.

5. Your presence in the classroom is critical for successful engagement of your students. Although texting and email provide modes of communication, they can inadvertently result in students feeling disconnected to the class and their faculty. Pairing your communication options with more direct and interactive content, via discussion posts and virtual chat sessions, helps students feel more connected and provide opportunities to better engage with you and their fellow classmates.

6. Utilize peer learning groups whenever possible. Student-to-student interactions and learning further strengthens a sense of academic community.

7. Consider the use of video lectures. Short videos provide additional insights and comments from faculty that can cover an array of topics to include the week's learning outcomes.

8. Utilize current events, news articles, web-content, to help broaden and enrich the discussion topics. You can also ask students to present specific citations or links to information they've come across, which could be helpful to their fellow classmates.

9. Participate in peer faculty meetings and trainings. These are great opportunities to discuss ideas with fellow faculty about their own experiences with online learning, as well as to learn about additional strategies, options or content that might further enhance classroom instruction.

10. Do regular check-ins with your students, through a regular, one-to-one discussion forum, chat option or email. Your feedback on assignments, quality of posts, timeliness in completing their work, and the like will help provide a sense of accountability while maintaining a high academic standard of performance.

11. The use of rubrics provides for consistent grading and evaluation criteria. It also helps keep everyone on the same page via a clear understanding of what is expected, and takes much of the subjectivity out of the process. Rubrics can also serve as a student self-check guide prior to asking them to submit their work.

12. Teaching online can be a very rewarding experience. Remember to take a deep breath, and know you are not alone. Transitioning from a traditional classroom setting to a virtual one can feel very challenging... tapping in to the numerous supports available to you through peer interaction and academic support will absolutely ensure a success outcome.

13. Lastly, and above all... have fun!