

Develop and Engage Part I: Best Practices for Online Course Development

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First Things:

This report is adapted from an earlier report submitted for the College of Business. It and the accompanying materials, practices, and suggestions begin with three assumptions:

1. Different teaching modes require different teaching methods.
2. Effective online learning begins with effective planning.
3. An online class is a real class, and it requires real work.

Consider what Alisa Cooper, an instructor for Scottsdale Community College, says in her presentation on online teaching: “If it’s easy, you’re doing it wrong.”

#1. Start Early

Developing and building a course may be more time-intensive than developing and building a face-to-face (F2F) course (White 3). Not only do you have to create the course and materials, you also have to develop and organize your Learning Management System (LMS). Your first experience with an online course will require several hours of training and development, usually on top of a regular teaching load (Capra 288). In addition, your first quarter with a new course can be remarkably busy. However, the more you teach and revise a course, the less demanding this portion will be.

Given the time involved, it is very difficult to put together an effective OL course in a matter of days. If possible, you should have at least one quarter to seek training, design, and implement a course. If you have less time, you will likely compromise the quality of your course and increase the likelihood of problems for yourself and students.

#2. Learn Your LMS (from the Instructor *and* Student Sides)

In a F2F class, there is no mediator between you and your students. You share a space and can always address students directly. However, in OL, the Learning Management System is the bridge between instructor and learner. As such, your course design should consider the strengths and emphases of your LMS. For example, Blackboard is a highly customizable, tool-rich LMS that allows instructors to customize and organize through a system of folders and navigation items. At the same time, Blackboard’s storage-and-tool structure can be overwhelming and opaque.

Canvas, on the other hand, restricts instructor customization, as it is designed to provide a more uniform, transparent, and efficient student experience. It compels instructors to work within a module-based structure with a less robust set of tools and fewer customization options than are available in Blackboard. Other LMSs, such as Angel and Moodle, likewise have their own emphases. Part of developing your OL course is getting to know your LMS and what it does best—and what it cannot do.

One of the easiest ways to understand your LMS is to enroll in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). These courses are generally free and allow you to see how effective OL teachers structure courses, use tools, and (sometimes) provide assessment. For example, learn.canvas.net offers a number of MOOCs, including “Business Ethics for the Real World” or “Social Issues through Comic Books,” all taught by university and college instructors using the Canvas LMS.

#3. Get Training

LMSs, like everything else in the world, get easier the more you use them—and the more you work with people who use them. At CWU there are a number of teachers willing to share ideas and approaches. In addition, the Office of Multimodal Learning and other campus resources provide books, training, and sympathetic shoulders for teachers transitioning into this new world. These resources also include course reviews, consultations, open training labs, personal tutoring, and a number of help resources.

In addition, the MML Office is staffed with a number of professionals, including specialists in instructional design, LMS administration, multimedia design and integration, library resources, and faculty issues and methods. MML presents numerous training sessions and online resources. For a list of these services, see www.cwu.edu/online-learning.

#4. Organize into Modules

A. B. White, Instructional Technologist at Freed-Hardeman University, recommends “chunking”—organizing course content and activities into manageable units of study (2). In a sense, this is the theory behind modules. Modules, in both Blackboard and Canvas, offer a way of grouping content, assignments, and other tasks into clearly delineated portions. These portions can be easily defined, much like a book chapter, and encompass multiple tools and activities.

The important thing to consider when using “chunks” or modules is to provide a consistent set of deadlines and expectations. In a F2F course, there are numerous activities to reinforce due dates and reinforce thematic connections between material. In an OL, a regular, consistent schedule is the best way of communicating and reinforcing expectations. One practice that can benefit you and your students is preparing a checklist for each module and/or the course. Upload this as a PDF on a “Master Page,” or file area, and in each module. This also addresses one of the “Planning” issues: informing students of expected time commitments (see #5).

Course materials, such as the syllabus and/or Canvas’s “Syllabus” or calendar features, should be used to reinforce deadlines. In an OL course, there are few happy accidents or opportunities to correct or amend misunderstandings. Having a clear structure, a clear syllabus, reoccurring tasks, and regular interaction are all vital to helping students succeed in your course.

#5. Have Clear Expectations...

One consideration of Online Learning (OL) is that there is significantly less room for improvisation. Whereas in a F2F course, “[i]nstructors can adjust their instructional plan and associated content based on daily, face-to-face interaction with students” (White 3), these adjustments can be problematic in OL.

The key for an effective OL class is to create an intentional and explicit structure. In a sense, this means establishing a clear pathway for success (White 3). Students should know how to begin, how to progress, and how to finish a class. OL students, generally more than F2F students, complete course work in the margins—between work, family, etc., rather than traditional F2F students who may schedule work and family time around classes. As Lorna Kerns, Senior Instructional Designer at the University of Pittsburg, notes, “online students tend to have vastly different schedules and commitments; some even live in disparate time zones” (203). The implications of this shift are numerous. One immediate implication is that there is less room for ambiguity in an OL course. Presenting a clear structure and delivering materials at the beginning of a course (front-loading) is vital to helping OL students succeed (White 3).

... and Provide Clear Weighting or Assignment Pointing That Allows Students to Map and Track Progress.

In addition, Janet Moore compiled a list of successful practices for the Sloan-C consortium. She notes a few examples that speak to how your planning can help students succeed:

To help students project and manage their time and also to help decide which courses they can succeed in, Troy State Montgomery provides a syllabus display and time on task as part of the registration process. At Athabasca University, the detailed syllabus helps students preview expectations before taking the course, reduce anxiety, pace themselves, and even work ahead of schedule to accommodate business and personal commitments. (Moore 94)

Often, first-time OL instructors are tempted to graft a F2F course onto an OL one, complete with several deadlines throughout the week. Although some OL instructors are successful with this practice, most risk frustrating OL students. In OL courses, you are not restricted by a Monday–Friday, F2F class schedule. You can make all—or most—module assignments due at one day, say on Monday, Thursday, or Friday. If you do keep to multiple due days, be sure that there is some regularity. For example, assign all initial discussion posts to be due on Tuesdays and final posts to be due on Thursday. Once you set

this pattern, don't change it. In addition, select one due time for all assignments and, again, don't change it. Do note that several instructors who choose a 12:00 due time (whether p.m. or a.m.) risk some confusion (state "midnight" or "noon," but be careful about stating 12:00 p.m.). You may want to choose a time that is hard to confuse between a.m. or p.m. (such as 6:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m.). Of course, you could always go European/military time (2000 hours or 1200 hours).

#6. Use a Variety of Assignments

As in a F2F course, OL courses are a blend of content and assignments. Modules help organize these elements, allowing you to present or assign content (readings, viewings, recorded audio or video lectures, slide shows, etc.) and match them to meaningful assessments. There are two main temptations that confront many first-time OL teachers: to reduce assignments to one or two major papers/tests, or to saturate the course with relentless discussion boards. Both of these approaches will undermine your class—and your enjoyment of teaching.

The major paper/test approach risks turning your class into a correspondence course (Cooper). It generally requires students to be completely self-directed, spending a quarter navigating a stream of endless readings. With this approach, there is little opportunity for correction or encouragement. Students and teachers both feel detached. Conversely, the excessive discussion board approach is an error at the other end of the spectrum. It accepts the seemingly reasonable but mistaken idea, as one instructor declares, that "[d]iscussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class" (Boettcher). This perspective seems reasonable, but, in practice, the effect is something completely different (see #9).

In her research, Kearns considers a study conducted in the Spring of 2011 at a large research university in the northeastern United States (199). Kearns focused on five categories of assignments found in a 24-course survey. These categories were *Written Assignments*, *Online Discussion*, *Fieldwork*, *Test/quiz/exam*, and *Presentation*.

Kearns found these five categories present throughout the studied courses, in varying degrees, with *Written Assignments* being the most common and the most integral to course weight. These elements are displayed in below (see fig. 1):

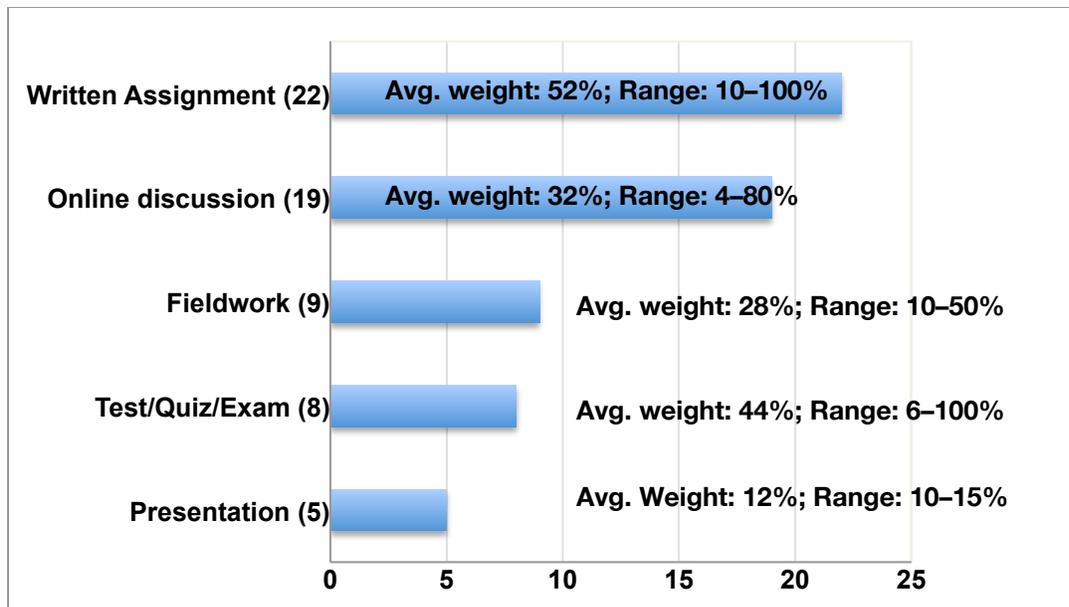


Figure 1. Assessment categories, along with their frequency of use, average weight, and range of contribution to overall course grade (Kearns 200).

Written Assignment

In this category, Kearns includes writing assignments such as research papers, case-studies, and short essays. 22 of the 24 courses Kearns studied included these assignments with at least one course’s complete student grade based solely on these assignments (Kearns 199).

LMSs offer numerous ways to assign and receive writing assignments. Blackboard provides Wiki, Blog, and Journal tools. Canvas does not provide blogs or journals, but does have a Wiki option through Canvas Pages or by incorporating Google Docs. Both of these LMSs allow for writing assignments to be copied-and-pasted or to be uploaded via electronic files. In addition, both systems have plagiarism checkers (SafeAssign for Bb, Turnitin for Canvas) and built-in markup tools (Crocodoc). In addition, you can upload marked papers (MS Word) and use rubrics for assessment.

Online Discussion

Kearns defines online discussions as “any asynchronous discussion activity undertaken on a discussion board, blog, or wiki” (199). As noted, Blackboard and Canvas differ on Wiki and Blog tools; however, both feature discussion boards. Although the Blackboard boards are more robust than the Canvas boards, Canvas allows for a more “Web 2.0” feel and for multimedia commenting. Both LMS systems allow for rubrics and commenting during assessment. Discussion boards may also be used for uploading and sharing files.

Fieldwork

Kearns considers fieldwork to be a specialized writing assignment that involves collecting field data and compiling a report (199). There is clearly some overlap between Fieldwork and Writing Assignments, but the main focus here is to provide records of data and, in many cases, to collaborate.

Fieldwork assignments may use many of the same tools used for Writing Assignments, including plagiarism checkers, as necessary. For Blackboard, Wikis are a good solution. In Canvas, the integration of Google Docs provides a powerful tool for compiling and sharing documents between groups or individuals.

Tests/Quiz/Exam

Kearns considers this type of assignment to be any assessment “composed of multiple-choice or short-answer questions” (199). These are common in OL courses. They are also challenging. In a F2F class, quizzes are easily monitored. They are generally designed to test reading or content comprehension/retention. However, the challenges of asynchronous, unmonitored quizzing may shift the focus of the F2F in-class quiz. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, but it does require consideration. For example, quizzes can be used to direct student focus to details or nuances in a reading or assignment.

CWU does have some tools to provide greater integrity to OL quizzes. These include Respondus tools (Lockdown Browser and Monitor). Neither of these is perfect, but Respondus Monitor provides a thorough way of assuring that certain test restrictions are enforced (to be used sparingly).

In addition, both Blackboard and Canvas have a number of ways to shape quizzes. These options include time parameters, amount of takes, feedback (delayed and immediate), password requirements, etc. In addition, Canvas offers a simple option for providing retakes or offering extended time for special circumstance, such as working with Disability Services.

Presentation

Presentations are relatively easy to adapt to the OL environment, with the exception of losing the shared synchronous audience. There are ways to integrate viewing, such as having presenters provide quiz material to test viewers or having viewers write brief assessments.

Presentations can be uploaded to LMSs in many ways, though—for video—the best way is to provide a link to a video stored on YouTube, Vimeo, Google, or some other service (this can be done by making an assignment in your LMS and permitting students to upload comments—or providing a discussion board). In addition, students can submit PowerPoints as assignments or upload to an embedding service.

Because many corporations and services have been using online presentations for years, there are several tools available to you and your students for presentations.

#7. Try Weighted Grades

As noted, flexibility can be difficult and even confusing for an online course. Because there is a pressing need to plan a class in advance, even the most organized instructor can feel overly confined once teaching actually begins. One approach that can ease some of this restriction is a weighted grading scale. In a points-based class, all assignments are integral, meaning that if you find, mid-quarter, that an assignment is redundant, insufficient, or excessive, you have little way of adjusting, removing, or adding assignments without altering the points available in the class (presumably, the points delineated in your course syllabus).

A weighted grade scale allows some options for making minor adjustments to your course. If you have planned too many discussion boards or quizzes, you can easily cancel a board without altering the total percentage possible in the class (and this action can be invisible if the adjustment happens prior to the opening of a module). In addition, a weighted grade scale allows for some flexibility if you were unable to completely plan every assignment before a class went live. Perhaps you have only thought through the final three weeks of the class—you know there will be a quiz or two, maybe a few discussions—but you don't have assignments finalized. A weighted scale permits you to complete construction of the course after the start date. All major LMSs have a weighted scale option.

#8. Use Groups or Collaborations

OL can be lonely. In many cases, instructors and students have accepted—and may even prefer—the independence of an OL course. However, there are times when collaborative work can be beneficial to OL students. J. V. Boettcher notes that “Online courses can be more enjoyable and effective when students have the opportunity to brainstorm and work through concepts and assignments with either one or two or more fellow students.” Likewise, A. B. White reminds us, “Group activities are just as important to the success of online courses as they are in traditional courses” (12).

If you have collaborative or group work in your F2F class, you can maintain those assignments in your OL course, provided you consider the asynchronous nature of OL education. The largest adjustments will be the time needed to complete these types of assignments, depending on the complexity involved. However, given some of the available tools, such as the Google Docs integration in Canvas, tracking group progress is relatively simple and, perhaps, more transparent and trackable than in a F2F course.

In addition, most LMSs (including Blackboard and Canvas) provide numerous group tools allowing for students within a group to communicate through tools (such as discussion boards) that students outside the group cannot access. Also, these LMSs allow students to easily form groups, either through a random

selection, your assignment, or through self-signup. Grades can be applied to an entire group or to individuals with the groups.

There are a variety of collaborative tasks available to OL courses. Some are extensive and will require careful coordination and tracking (such as a major technical or research report). Some are quick and repeatable (such as an annotated bibliography). For ideas, consider *Using Wikis for Online Collaboration: The Power of the Read-Write Web* by James A. and Margaret West (2009). This resource and others like it are available through the Office of Multimodal Learning.

#9. Use Discussion Boards with Purpose

Lorna Kerns explains, “Several instructors reported being overwhelmed with the amount of reading [these discussions] required. As one instructor remarked, the discussion board became ‘cumbersome when done every week’ (202). In addition, excessive discussions often leave students with the nagging sense of “busy work” (Lowenthal). For some reason, these are not typical criticisms of traditional face-to-face discussions.

Online discussions are easy to abuse. Some practices that may prevent discussions from boring students or overwhelming instructors are 1) reducing discussion size (creating group discussions rather than class wide discussions), 2) providing regular feedback (discussed more, later), 3) providing longer periods for boards to be open (including re-directing students to old boards or forming a portfolio project that requires students to compile and evaluation their own posts), and 4) setting clear standards for use (including the use of citations to avoid “I agree” and “I like what you said” superficiality) (Lowenthal).

There is no rule for how many discussions you must have in a course. Remember that online discussions are not equivalent to F2F conversations. In some ways, they can go much deeper and invite greater participation—if they aren’t abused or treated as something we *have* to do because we’re expected to do them. Be intentional, clear, and interactive. Model and encourage good posts. Be present on discussion boards without stifling student engagement.

#10. Use Multimedia

The use of multimedia can be one of the most effective ways to engage students. In one study by researchers at the University of Kentucky and the University of Minnesota Duluth, the use of multimedia and messaging correlated to student views of instructor competency, caring, and trustworthiness (Schrodt and Witt qtd. in Frisby et al. 470). They note that instructors who added some type of audio component “outperformed” text-only instructors and were perceived by students as more competent and caring (Frisby et al. 474).

The researchers add that, given concern for multiple learning styles and methods, different modes of instruction provide different supports for students: “text contributes visual factors; audio contributes

vocalics; and video contributes visual factors and nonverbal factors” (Frisby et al. 470) V. J. Boettcher contends that a “balanced set of dialogues” are necessary—not only to address multiple learning methods, but to develop a “supportive online course community.”

Increasingly, LMS systems address these multimedia and communication needs. As mentioned, Canvas provides several ways to integrate multimedia into conversations. It also offers simple ways to embed content from outside providers such as YouTube or Khan Academy. Likewise, both Blackboard and Canvas have options for integrating material—including assessments—with outside products and services.

In addition Blackboard provides full integration with iTunes for video and audio podcasting. Frisby et al. note a study that the use of iPods for instruction (podcasts) helped students score higher on knowledge tests (474). In coming months, CWU will complete integration of MediaAmp as a way of embedding streaming audio and video into Canvas-based courses.

Bonus. Make Mistakes and Borrow

Remember that you are not alone. No one has this all figured out yet. We’re still experimenting—sometimes succeeding, often failing. We’re still gathering data and trying to decode it. OL teaching is still in its infancy—perhaps toddlerhood—especially compared to the F2F mode of instruction, which has been around as long as students and teachers have existed. As such, it is important to try things, to borrow from other instructors, and to be free to make mistakes.

OL education differs significantly from the F2F classroom, but many of the objectives remain. An effective F2F teacher usually succeeds because he or she is driven by a passion for the subject matter and a concern for student learning. This document—and the approaches/ideas it considers—is aimed at those same objectives. OL education only offers shortcuts to instructors who already take shortcuts in F2F teaching. But for instructors who remain passionate about their subjects and their students, OL offers a diverse set of tools and opportunities for sophisticated, creative, and communal student learning.

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