

### How to conduct a peer review of online teaching (DRAFT)

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Evaluating instructors in online courses isn't much different from evaluating instructors who teach in physical classrooms. After all, online teaching requires most of the same skills as in-person teaching (i.e., organization, communication, knowledge of subject matter, creation of a welcoming, inclusive environment). This document is intended to guide you through peer review using the Benchmarks framework developed by the Center for Teaching Excellence, focusing on elements relevant to online teaching.

#### Where do I start?

Regardless of how a course is taught, a high-quality peer review should include a **conversation** with the instructor that is informed by a set of course materials provided in advance of or during the conversation. That conversation is crucial because it helps an evaluator understand how an instructor has approached a class and allows the instructor to articulate the thinking behind assignments, rubrics, scheduling, communication, and other aspects of a course.

Given the critical importance of course organization, interaction sites, and feedback mechanisms for online or hybrid courses, the reviewer may also wish to conduct a separate, more detailed **review of course materials** and Blackboard/LMS site.

#### What do I look for?

In your peer review, you will want to examine:

1. **Course learning goals**, and how these goals align with course materials and assessments.
2. **Teaching practices**, with specific focus on well-organized course management and high-quality feedback.
3. **Evidence of an engaging and inclusive class climate.**
4. **Evidence of student learning.**
5. The instructor's **reflection on their teaching** over time.

#### How can I evaluate someone without visiting a class?

This is the most common question departments ask when evaluating online teaching. In-person class visits can certainly provide evidence of student-instructor interaction and implementation of lesson plans. Too often, though, these visits are done in a hurried manner, and the evaluations that emerge tend to emphasize performance in a single class while overlooking much more substantive evidence of course design and student learning. The Benchmarks framework emphasizes the importance of an instructor interview and a review of course materials over a class visit to gather evidence. A class visit can be useful but often isn't necessary. A review of online teaching requires a more thorough look at the elements and interactions of a course. The Benchmarks framework can help identify aspects of the course to evaluate and relevant sources of evidence.

## Steps to the Peer Review Process

**I. Preparation.** Instructor prepares the reviewer a set of course materials to inform the conversation. Essential items include (1) Syllabus; (2) Examples of assignments and criteria for assessing student performance; and (3) Examples of student work on the assignments. Instructor could also discuss (in writing or through the conversation) their reasons for decisions about content, goals, and teaching practices.

**II. Conversation.** We suggest you begin by asking the instructor to give you a quick tour of their course site in the learning management system, along with an overview of the course (what is the course level and typical enrollment, who are the intended students, where does it fit in the curriculum?). The conversation can then follow the first five dimensions of the Benchmarks Rubric.

**A. Goals, Content, and Alignment:** What students are expected to learn and why.

Materials: Syllabus, Blackboard site (e.g., modules)

Possible conversation prompts:

- *What are your goals for students in the course? How do these relate to department, university, or discipline goals?*
- *What are three critical things you want students to take away by the end of the semester?*
- *Do the stated goals for the course match the needs of students with whom you are working? How is that apparent?*
- *How have you organized the course, from week or week or module to module, to help students make progress on the course goals?*

**B. Teaching Practices:** The activities and assignments used in and out of class to help students reach learning goals.

Materials: Sample Assignments, Learning Activities, Blackboard site for course

Possible conversation prompts:

- *What sort of synchronous contact time do you have with students and how do you spend it? Share some examples. How do students respond to the contact time?*
- *What asynchronous activities do students engage in? Why are these important? How do these activities relate to your goals for student learning?*
- *What strategies have you used to help all students feel included?*
- *What opportunities do students have to work with and learn from each other?*
- *How do you provide feedback to students on their learning? What opportunities do they have to learn from feedback?*

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**C. Achievement of Learning Outcomes:** How the instructor knows whether students are reaching major learning goals.

Materials: Example assignments/assessments, grading criteria/rubrics, sample student work on low-stakes (e.g., discussion board posts) and high-stakes assignments/assessments

Possible conversation prompts:

- *Which assignments do you think are most central to the course and best illustrate student learning?*
- *How do you evaluate student work? How do students respond to this evaluation?*
- *Does the student work on these assignments meet your expectations? How do you know?*
- *Do you know if there are any inequities in student performance? If so, have you taken any steps to address them?*

**D. Class Climate:** The learning environment established between instructor and students, and among students.

Materials: Syllabus, Blackboard site (e.g., campus resource links), student reflection assignments or surveys (if used)

Possible conversation prompts:

- *How do you encourage motivation, inclusion, and a sense of belonging among your students?*
- *What strategies do you use to communicate with your students? How are students interacting with each other? Are there things you are doing to build a sense of community?*
- *How do you think students view the learning experiences they have in this course? How do you know?*
- *How has student feedback informed the way you teach this course?*

**E. Reflection and Iterative Growth:** Development of teaching practices and responsiveness of course design to student performance over time.

Materials: Summaries or examples of student performance/work from different semesters (if available)

Possible conversation prompts:

- *Did you invite students to provide feedback on the course during the semester? What changes (if any) did you make in response to this feedback?*
- *What changes have you made in this course from previous semesters? Why? How has this been informed by evidence of your students' learning? Did the changes yield the outcome you wanted?*
- *What is your greatest challenge teaching this course?*
- *Did you reflect on student learning, keep a journal or use some means of recording things that need to be changed in a future version of the course?*

### III. Guidelines for Online Materials Review

An online material review should involve a detailed analysis of the instructor's plan for learning. This analysis should include an evaluation of course materials, including the course site on the learning management system and examples of assignments and student work; targeted goals for students; methods of measuring learning, indicators of success in learning, and use of time with students during scheduled classes, studios and labs.

Examine the course syllabus and Blackboard (or other LMS) site, sample assignments and rubrics, and examples of student work. The following questions are intended to guide your review of course materials and direct you to possible sources of evidence. They are by no means comprehensive.

#### **Goals, Content, and Alignment:**

- ❖ Were course-level learning goals clearly stated in the course syllabus?
- ❖ Did the instructor set clear goals for each week or module of the course?
- ❖ Did course materials align with course objectives?
- ❖ Did assignments align with course objectives?

#### **Teaching Practices:**

##### **Organization and course management**

- ❖ Is the Blackboard site organized so that students can easily find the syllabus, assignments, instructor contact information, and other components of the course?
- ❖ Does the syllabus make it clear to students the maximum time the instructor will take to respond to electronic queries?
  - Is that timeframe reasonable? (No more than 24 hours, except on weekends, is common.)
- ❖ Were course materials posted at the beginning of the course or did the instructor make materials available on a schedule that gave students ample time to prepare and complete work?
- ❖ Did assignments have clear instructions?
- ❖ Were changes in assignments or scheduling made clear?
- ❖ Was Blackboard updated as needed during the course?
- ❖ If tools outside Blackboard were used, did students receive clear instructions on how to access and use them?

##### **Quality and timeliness of feedback**

- ❖ Were rubrics and/or assignment guidelines clear?
- ❖ Did the instructor grade and return student assignments in a timely manner?
- ❖ Was the instructor available for consultation on assignments?
- ❖ Was the feedback that students received meaningful, constructive, and respectful?

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- ❖ Did students receive feedback on their work within the first two weeks of class? (Early feedback helps them make adjustments in study habits and helps them understand course expectations.)
- ❖ Were grades posted in a timely manner?

### **Achievement of Learning Outcomes:**

- ❖ Were assessments authentic?
- ❖ Were expectations for performance on assessments clearly communicated to students (e.g., through rubrics)?
- ❖ How did the instructor know that students were learning?
- ❖ Did the instructor assess student learning at the end of the course?

### **Classroom Climate:**

- ❖ Does the Blackboard site include information about campus resources for students (e.g., CAPS, financial aid)?
- ❖ Were there appropriate opportunities for student-student and student-instructor interaction?
- ❖ Did the instructor reach out to students before the first day of class and give them some insight into the course?
- ❖ Did the instructor communicate with students on the first day of the class?
- ❖ Did the instructor provide an audio or video introduction so that students get a sense of the person leading the class?
- ❖ Did the instructor communicate regularly to students via email, Blackboard announcements, messaging, audio, or video?
- ❖ Did the syllabus set an appropriate tone for the class and draw students into course materials?
- ❖ Were messages and announcements to students respectful?
- ❖ Did the instructor respond to students in a timely manner?
- ❖ Did communications convey a sense of interest in student success and make it clear that the instructor is available to help?

### **Reflection and Iterative Growth:**

- ❖ Did the instructor reflect on student learning, keep a journal or use some means of recording things that need to be changed in a future version of the course?
- ❖ Does the instructor have a plan for making changes in a future version of the class?
- ❖ Did the instructor invite students to provide feedback on the class midway through the class to see whether changes needed to be made?

**IV. Peer Review Document.** Prepare a document that summarizes the peer review by being reflective about your conversation with the course instructor and review of course materials. Refer to the evidence and examples reviewed and discussed in your conversation to support your comments about each dimension of the Benchmarks rubric.

## Benchmarks for Teaching Effectiveness

### Sources

Penn State Online, “Faculty Competencies for Online Teaching,” 2011.

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