

Tips for Online Teaching...

The purpose of this “Tip Sheet” is to provide relevant information and ideas SON faculty can employ to increase the usability of his/her online course to all students. In any environment, there will always be individuals of varying ability, and it is important to take these varying abilities into account when designing/teaching an online course. Achieve a balance between presentation and content, use technology appropriately, and establish a time framework so students know what to expect and can get into a weekly routine. Personalizing your course by adding those personal touches makes a huge difference in how a student views your course. Motivate your students by requiring class participation, give positive feedback, and engage students to prevent their feeling of isolation in cyberspace.



Learn the Technology:

Get your computer literacy and knowledge of WebCT Vista up to speed well in advance of the course start date.

Allow Enough Time:

Plan on taking longer to design the structure of an online course. More time spent in design up front will lessen course “Maintenance time”. Developing and delivering the course the first time requires more effort and time, but then decreases with repeated offerings.

Use Students’ Perspective:

Go through the course “from a students’ perspective” before the first class starts. Make sure what is expected of students is clearly stated. Don’t forget to include when and how to submit course work. WebCT Vista automatically generates a “Demo ID” when you log in to your course. This ID can be added to assignments & activities so you (the instructor) can view content from the students’ perspective to validate the course.

Check Accuracy:

Check out all links, dates, etc. before students do. They’ll let you know otherwise.

Acknowledge “netiquette”:

Words can be interpreted very differently online. Make sure you explain your feelings with cues like, “I feel very strongly about this,” or “I’m confused by your answer. Is this what you mean?”

Syllabus:

First check your syllabus, whether it has been provided to you or whether you have developed your own. Check your syllabus for the following:

- An accurate course description, section, meeting times, and dates of holidays, assignments, and exams.
- Your current contact information (phone, email, fax, etc.) and office hours
- A list of required textbook(s), special equipment, etc.
- A synopsis of major learning goals in terms of knowledge and skills students will learn.

- A Topical Outline showing the projected dates for assignments, quizzes, exams, projects, etc.
- A statement of your right to change the course schedule and learning activities as needed.
- Academic Honor Code (link)
- A detailed list of your expected and prohibited behaviors in the online classroom. (Make particularly explicit details regarding attendance issues and online conferencing)
- Explanation of course grading, along with policies for making up exams, class work, or late assignments.
- A section contrasting acceptable with unacceptable academic behaviors regarding homework, term papers, small group participation, etc.

First Class Meeting Preparation Steps

To reduce the chances of something going wrong during the first class, check these items:

- Make sure you have prepared your computer and have the appropriate plug-in applications loaded. This is necessary on any computer you intend to access your course from. If you need assistance, contact the AskIT Help Desk at (205)996-5555, or AskIT@uab.edu.
- Ensure you have pop-up blocker software disabled
- Log in to your course early to ensure student ID's have been loaded to your course.
- Make yourself available to answer any questions for students (Discussion Board, Private Mail, Live Audio Conference, Video Orientation, etc.)
- If students know when you are available and how to get support when things don't go as planned, it will relieve some of the anxiety of students feeling isolated in cyberspace.
- Give students an activity to create a Discussion Board message for a personal introduction. Don't underestimate their technical savvy. Provide a personal example to get them started.
- One of the best ways for an instructor to instill confidence in students and show they care is to connect a face and a name. Consider posting a student photo page to your course.

First Class Questions to Consider

- Am I energized to be enthusiastic about this class?
- Is the online classroom organized properly?
- Is my name, course title, and phone number easy to find?
- Do I have an ice-breaker planned?
- Do I have a way to gather information on student backgrounds, interests, and expectations for the course, questions, and concerns?
- Is the Syllabus complete and clear?
- Have I outlined how students will be evaluated?
- Do I have announcements of needed information ready?
- When class is over, will students want to come back? Will you want to come back?

What Online Students Want to Tell Faculty

Information contained in this section is a compilation of comments from the SON "Evaluation of the Course", and "Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness" survey, Oct. 2000 – Jan. 2007.

- Design a course that is clear and well organized. "Make sure we know what is expected and when. Clear deadlines are important to students."

- Course outlines should better outline all the assignments that must be completed. That way it would be easier to gauge your time.
- “Consider emphasizing the course conference (Wimba) by making it a part of your class assessment, possibly as a substitute for test, paper, or project.”
- Be Accessible. “Quick response to my questions.”
- “When assigning group projects, consider our overall class schedule and available time.”
- “Give frequent feedback on assignments so students have a sense of what they have mastered and where they need to focus attention.”
- Instructor presence in the class is important. “Courses should not be self-taught by students.”

What Online Students say about Assessments

- Feedback needs to be timely.
- Feedback should include grades
- Feedback needs to be personal. “I would personally like to see teachers send a one or two line email to students each week about their work – be it their writing or quality of comments.”
- Good feedback inspires more learning: “I would challenge **** with a question and a half hour later be able to sign on to my computer and not only would the question be answered, but he would challenge me to a question.”
- “One of the things that helped me the most is the fact that I received feedback from all my classmates not only the instructor.”

What Online Students say about Threaded Discussions

- “Deadlines are important. Instructors should post deadlines for graded threaded discussions. If TD deadlines are weekly or biweekly, the instructor should post grades after the deadline.”
- “Instructors need to be present in the threaded discussion to provide reasonable feedback and direction.”
- Many students commented on and appreciated well thought-out discussion assignments and live-audio conferencing.

What Online Students say about Group Projects

- Many students find group projects difficult, “People don’t follow through with their commitments and you’re left hanging.”
- Others enjoy them: “I didn’t think I would like working in teams, but I enjoyed it very much.”

Quotes come from SON “Evaluation of the Course” and Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness” surveys (2001 -2007)