

Best Practices for Effective Online Facilitation

By now, you have recorded your lectures, designed fantastic forum prompts, fleshed out your assignments and assessments, and set up your Moodle shell. Pat yourself on the back! We know that a lot of time and effort goes into developing a stellar online course and we hope that our training resources have made the development process straightforward and maybe, just maybe, fun! As good as you look in that course developer hat, it's time to switch gears and talk about how to facilitate your students' engagement with your developed content and with each other.

While there is no shortage of techniques and strategies for effective online instruction, the most important aspects of excellent facilitation can be boiled down to two elements: **expectations and presence**.

Setting Expectations:

As with any relationship, regular communication is essential. In the online classroom, you do not have the luxury of seeing students eyes glaze over when you go off on a tangent or widen when you tell an exceptionally compelling story. Without these nonverbal cues, it becomes even more important to build in ample opportunities for interaction and feedback. You – the content expert and seasoned professional – are the most valuable aspect of the course and students want to have access to your expertise and guidance. As such, it is important to set expectations early on in your course concerning:

- What technologies you will use and reminders for how to access them
- How and when students should contact you
- How and when you will participate online and provide feedback.

Once you have set these expectations, *be sure to stick to your plans*.

Communicating with Students:

We strongly encourage instructors to use the forum features in Moodle for most communications with their students. Students often have similar questions about assignment guidelines, confusing aspects of the lectures, or other elements of the course and posting answers to these types of questions in a public space ensures that students are all receiving the same information and that your inbox won't be flooded with repetitive emails from students. Most instructors will set up a general Q&A forum in the time-independent portion of their Moodle course for these types of questions.

Instructors also typically provide an email address and/or phone number at which they can be reached should students have personal questions, such as those related to assignment extensions or grade clarifications. To comply with our quality standards for online instruction, **we ask that you respond to all students' question – be they personal emails or posts to a Q&A forum –**



within 24 to 48 hours. If it is going to take longer than 48 hours to respond to a student's inquiry (which is entirely possible if the planning unit needs to get involved for any reason), please just let the student know that you received his/her communication and will respond to them shortly. It is also a good idea to provide students with guidelines for how they should be communicating with each other in the forums since participation in discussion forums is often worth 10-30% of students' final grades. Many instructors will insert a brief paragraph in the syllabus outlining their expectations for discussion forum posts and the types of feedback students should be providing one another. One suggestion is to provide students with two deadlines for each discussion forum, one for their initial post and one for their responses to other students' posts. You may, for example, ask students to post their initial response to respond to the weekly forum prompt by Thursday evening and to post reactions to a minimum of 2 or 3 other students' posts by Sunday night. This ensures that students aren't waiting until the last minute to post their initial responses to the prompt and will have sufficient time to review and react to other students' contributions.

Be sure to be very specific about deadlines and indicate time zones when listing due dates. Since we are located in Southern California, our Moodle server defaults to Pacific Standard Time, so keep this in mind when you communicate deadlines. Clear instructions and guidelines for participation in discussion forums will also provide you with objective criteria to refer to should students have questions about how their participation grades were calculated.

Instructor Presence:

In an effort to ensure high levels of instructor presence, **we also expect our online instructors to provide visible feedback in their course every 72 hours.** This can be as simple as responding to students' posts in a discussion forum or posting a short video that further explains a concept that students seem to be struggling with.

Another idea is to post a written or recorded response to the interactions occurring in the discussion forums. This demonstrates to students that you are actively reviewing their contributions to the classroom discussion without requiring you to respond to each student's individual post. For example, you could say "I noticed that a lot of you brought up the same issue in last week's discussion forum and I wanted to provide you with a few additional examples to help clarify that concept" or "I really enjoyed reading all of your responses to last week's prompt. Mary and Peter's posts were exceptionally relevant given the recent developments that have unfolded over the last few weeks in industry news". This is not only an excellent way to maintain a personal connection to your students but also allows you to easily customize the learning experience for each cohort of students.

It is also important to elicit feedback from students throughout the course to determine whether or not learning objectives are being met and what can be improved upon as the course continues. This can be done formally through anonymous polls and quizzes or informally through discussion forums.