

## Effective Online Teaching at SNL Online

Extensive research has found that a deep and meaningful educational experience is nurtured when the instructor and course design together establish three kinds “presence”:

- 1) Social presence, which is “the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in the online environment”;
- 2) Teaching presence, which is “the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes”; and
- 3) Cognitive presence, which is “the degree to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse” (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Arbaugh, 2008, pp. 1-2).

Teaching an SNL Online course involves three kinds of activities:

1. **Class administration** includes preparing the class by checking the content, entering your personal introduction and contact information, and adding due dates for each assignment or activity into the course. It also includes guiding the students through the learning process, by summarizing past work and introducing new work through news items, posts and/or emails, answering questions, reaching out to non-participating students, and solving problems. In some courses it may also include guiding group work, holding webinars, or handling problems with tools outside the course environment such as My Math Lab or wikis.
2. **Leading discussion** involves creating an environment for reflection, application, and deep cognitive engagement with the material, with other students, and with you, the instructor. To do this well, you will need to set clear expectations, read the discussions regularly, and support the discussion consistently.
3. **Assessing student work and providing feedback** generally involves both formative feedback and summative feedback. Formative feedback should be developmental, and should include specific information about what is done well and how students can improve. Regular feedback on discussion is easy to do in D2L, and helps students engage with one another, the material, and you. Summative feedback at SNL is done not only with term papers and projects, but also through the end-of-term assessment of student competence mastery – a special assessment tool created for SNL students.

The following are best practices to create a deep and meaningful educational experience for SNL’s adult learners.

### General Course Administration

1. Customize your course with:

- a. Specific deadline dates (NOT “end of week 2” but “July 23”) in the Checklists, at the least.
  - b. If there are Competence Groups, assign students to them by the end of the first week. This is critical for them to view all competence-related assignments.
  - c. Add your biography in the Profile (and point students to it in discussion)
  - d. Add your picture in the Profile. This is important; it will appear on every post you make.
  - e. Add your contact information in the Profile. Personal information is important to make you a “real person” to them.
  - f. Add your “signature file” on your emails, so they always know who an email is from.
2. Check the Faculty Only section of the course, to find information to help you teach. This may include ideas for discussion prompts; grading tips; sample rubrics; group information; and other information.
  3. Use News Items: to guide their activities; give them all-class feedback; let them know you read their work; announce changes; and give them a sense of your presence. Twice per week, as a rule of thumb.
    - a. You can occasionally send emails to students, if you wish to reach out to them. Do this sparingly so as to avoid overwhelming them; the place to teach is within the D2L course. (More on this in number 3).
    - b. You can send them to the Course Q/A or other discussions to read lengthy posts via News Items.
    - c. You can add short (less than one minute) Voice Posts – short comments, so they hear you addressing them. This is a great idea to build teaching presence. However, if you write and say the same things, they will quickly stop listening because they can read faster than you can talk.
    - d. Prepare some posts, with weekly guidance, ahead of time. Post with time-delay, so it will show up as an announcement when you want it to.
  4. Use email sparingly – mostly to get them into the class. Respond to email questions in the course Q/A (copy/paste their question anonymously, then answer it), but always email back to tell them you will do this. Only engage in extended email with personal or grading issues.
    - a. Start your work by reading and responding to the Course Q/A every time you go in. Do it first, so you don’t forget.
    - b. Ask them to sign their name on emails
    - c. Respond quickly to all email, even if to say: “Great question! I’ll answer in the Course Q/A.”
    - d. If you use the email tool to send a note to all students, post the email in the course (usually in the Course Q/A section).

5. Be specific with what you want. E.g., “Post first response by Wednesday, and all responses by Sunday. Respond to at least 3 of your peers.” Every faculty has different expectations; share yours directly and clearly.
  - a. Provide them with rubrics that show how your expectations are part of the grading process.

### **Developing a Strong Discussion**

6. Teach them computer shortcuts in the Course Q/A. Use them yourself. E.g.:
  - a. Bookmark anything you can
  - b. Move columns around in the gradebook to make grading easier. Hide anything you don't plan to grade, so they don't expect it.
7. Praise, praise, praise, and don't be afraid to show enthusiasm. They can't hear your tone of voice, so you have to either use emoticons ( ☺ ) or punctuation !! or explicit words (“I really like how you apply XYZ!”). Use their names, and don't hesitate to respond to many students in one post, and use all their names (e.g., “John, Siobhan, Tyrell and Judy, what a great discussion! Everyone, please make sure that you read this and think especially about...”)
8. Either tell them your expectations for class climate, or ask them to set class norms, or both. E.g.,:
  - a. Should they read one another's posts?
  - b. How should they express disagreement?
  - c. What's the role of the readings?
  - d. If any groupwork, what are the expectations?The more they set the expectations, and they are explicit, the more likely they are to follow them.
9. In the initial introductions, you should respond to every student at least once. Otherwise, they don't know if you read their post, or have any idea who they are.
10. After the initial introduction responses, focus on trends and ideas so they go back and forth among each other. Avoid single responses to every student post; you want them to discuss with your guidance, so you have to guide the group rather than each individual.
  - a. Tell them to respond to one another, and help each other. Praise publicly when they do.
  - b. Generally, you should post at least once per day (5 days/week). In a discussion-intensive class you should be posting once per every 7-8 student posts, on average. If you don't post, they don't know that you're reading.

11. Ask them first for an answer, instead of telling them. Ask, coax, guide, recommend, hint. Lead them with Socratic questioning. Be clear about what you're doing (e.g., "That's a great question. Before I answer it, I want to know what you all think based on the Sternberg reading. There are many perspectives, and I want to know yours! I'll share my response by the end of the week.")
  - a. It's fine to tell them an answer when they ask directly, but that should not be the most common interaction you have.
  - b. Sum up the overall learning at the end of the week or module. This is usually best done with a news item. You can lead into the next week's material with an overview of tasks in the same announcement.
  - c. You can do this with a short voice recording for part of the weekly review.
  
12. Be precise with critique, and always include a positive comment. E.g., "Great start on this, John! You've identified one interesting issue here. I'd like you all to consider the XYZ reading about ABC on this topic. Can anyone see how this might apply here? I think it's key to our understanding."
  
13. Don't shut students down if they are off-topic; divert them instead.
  - a. Set up a forum for personal or off-topic conversations
  - b. When in doubt, refer to focusing on competences.

### **Assessing and Giving Feedback**

14. Give speedy feedback on what you want, especially with discussion. Give open-ended discussion feedback in weeks 1 and 2 to all students, so you can align their expectations. Then you can reduce – and ultimately eliminate – open-ended feedback on discussion in subsequent weeks.
  - a. If you don't want to assign grades (even Complete/Incomplete) for them, simply hide the column in the grade center.
  - b. Giving grades **and feedback** on each week's discussion should take around 1.5 hours.
  - c. Giving grades (only) on each week's discussion should take less than 30 minutes. You can do this in weeks 3-10, as long as they know what you are looking for.
  
15. Give feedback on discussion using either a template or rubric, or consistently including key factors. Good topics to include:
  - a. Mastery of competence, depth and accuracy of understanding
  - b. Use of course readings, and/or outside information (research) – but if they insert links without commentary, ask them specifically for a synopsis of the website and why they feel it is interesting or helpful
  - c. Application of concepts

- d. Timing of contributions – starting early and continuing through the week to have a deep discussion
  - e. Engagement with classmates to create an effective learning community.  
*Praise what you want repeated, and ask for what they didn't do.*
16. Some classes have competence-specific assignments. Students ONLY access those assignments if you have assigned them to the Group for their competence. This is a critical step; instructions are here:  
<http://www.snlonline.depaul.edu/Documents/SettingUpYourCourse.pdf>.
- a. What may seem complicated to you makes students' lives simpler, as they only view the tasks they must do.
17. Craft your feedback in Word. Keep copies of general examples; copy-paste and modify.
- a. If you work in D2L too long without hitting Enter, you will be timed out. Don't lose your work!
  - b. Post all feedback in the D2L course, so the students have it available all together. Do NOT email feedback to them.
18. Remember that they can't hear your tone of voice, and you can't hear theirs. Assume it's positive. If you're upset, walk away and wait to respond.
- a. Never write in the course, or email, in anger. Write it in Word and wait a day.
  - b. Don't hesitate to call the SNL Online director, or your mentor, for advice or a second opinion on a class problem.

### Using Groups

19. If you use groups for work (not just for competence-limited tasks), give them a means to assess one another. Free riding is extremely common online, so most online students dislike group assignments.
- a. Allow them to break up if they need to
  - b. If possible, allow them to do well even if their group members' don't do their share (e.g., if they respond to the group work with a critique or analysis, they can demonstrate personal knowledge vs. the group product.)
  - c. Assign roles, and rotate them. Online groups work much better if people have more structure
  - d. Give them a format for evaluation ahead of time, so they know that they will be assessed on things like timeliness

## References

Swan, K.P., Richardson, J.C., Ice, P., Garrison, D.R., Cleveland-Innes, M., and Arbaugh, J.B. (2008). Validating a measurement tool of presence in online communities of inquiry. *e-Mentor*, 24(2), pp. 1-12.