

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).



(From Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000)

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 announcements 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. 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”)
 - b. Your biography
 - c. Your picture, or a picture of something meaningful to you
 - d. Your contact information. Personal information is important, because they can't see you.
2. Use Announcements: 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, at least.
 - a. Click the box to send these announcements as an email 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 Blackboard course. (More on this in number 3).
 - b. You can send them to the Course Q/A or other discussions via announcements,
 - c. 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.
3. 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. Use the announcements to send emails to everyone. If you use the email tool, post the email in the course.
4. 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

5. Teach them Blackboard shortcuts in the Course Q/A. Use them yourself. E.g.:
- a. Use the Collect button (to view 6-8 discussion posts at the same time). Teach them to!
 - b. Bookmark anything you can
 - c. Keep multiple copies of the course open (Control N will create another copy) when grading; resize the windows to have 2 open side-by-side.
 - d. Move columns around in the gradebook to make grading easier. Hide anything you don’t plan to grade, so they don’t expect it.
6. 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...”)
7. 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 group work, what are the expectations?
- The more they set the expectations, and they are explicit, the more likely they are to follow them.
8. 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.
9. 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). 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.
10. 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 be rare. Otherwise, you become the Sage on the Stage rather than the Guide on the Side.
 - b. Sum up the overall learning at the end of the week or module. This is usually best done with an announcement. You can lead into the next week's material with an overview of tasks in the same announcement.
11. 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."
12. 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

13. 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. Set up each forum for grading to allow you to view each student's posts together, in one page, at the end of each week. 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 (if you set the forum to be gradable).
 - c. Giving grades 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.

14. 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.

15. Craft your feedback in Word. Keep copies of general examples; copy-paste and modify.
 - a. If you work in Blackboard too long without hitting Enter, you will be timed out. Don't lose your work!
 - b. Post all feedback in the Blackboard course, so the students have it available all together. Do NOT email feedback to them.

16. 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

17. If you use groups, 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

- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
- 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.