

LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE



Planning your online class

Aims and overview

This episode explores some of the key considerations when planning your online or blended (face-to-face and online) class. It examines the importance of considering pedagogy before technology; constructively aligning assessment with learning outcomes; and the integration of digital literacy skills. It also offers some useful strategies for deciding which components are better suited to an online learning environment.



Watch the video
<http://bit.ly/d18ac5>

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Released January 2011

**“Does what you’re doing actually gain from happening online?
If it doesn’t, then don’t do it online.”** (Darrall Thompson)

“The biggest pitfall when you start teaching online is to think that the technology is going to somehow solve problems for you, or that the technology should be your main focus.” (Professor Matthew Allen)

“...the way that people behave in a face-to-face context, and the way they behave in an online context are two totally different things, and content should be tailor-made to suit those differences.” (Associate Professor Rick Bennett)

Key issues to consider when planning your online class

While the basic principles of curriculum preparation and development used in face-to-face classes are still applicable to fully online and [blended classes](#), the introduction of an online component to a class or unit of study adds an extra layer of complexity. However, it also offers an opportunity for students to interact and learn in ways that traditional face-to-face teaching can't offer. How students learn in an online context is different to that of the face-to-face environment and careful consideration and planning is required to ensure the online learning experience is effective, engaging and aligned with the learning outcomes for the class.

There are several issues to consider when planning your online class:

- *The importance of pedagogy over technology*
- *The need to constructively align assessment with learning outcomes*
- *The integration of [digital literacy](#)*
- *Strategic evaluation of which components of the class are better suited to the online environment (if a blended class is being considered).*

The importance of pedagogy over technology

The use of technology is increasingly offering new learning and teaching opportunities to students and teachers, such as increased flexibility with time and physical location, and the ability to access a wide range of rich online resources.

There are, however, many incorrect assumptions made about the benefits of using technology, which need to be considered by teachers when first planning or starting to teach an online or blended class. It is of primary importance when beginning to plan an online class, to realise that:

- *Technology will not automatically bring benefits and solve any existing curriculum problems for teachers (eg lack of student engagement, etc) without needing to rethink the pedagogy*
- *Existing face-to-face content and teaching strategies will usually not work equally successfully in an online context without any adjustment or planning*
- *The introduction of an online component won't automatically make a class or program more relevant to today's students, and is not a guarantee of increasing student engagement*
- *The '[Net Generation](#)' of students is not always familiar with using technology in their learning process.*

The reasons for introducing technology into the learning environment, and the purpose that it is intended to serve, needs to be carefully considered and articulated as part of the planning of an online or blended class. Technology should not be the main focus of the process, but rather a component which enhances the learning and teaching experience, and which is carefully integrated into the curriculum planning.

Useful online class planning strategies

Blended learning classes

- **Be careful not to double up on work for both teacher and students.** Divide learning activities or content best suited to either online or face-to-face environments carefully, otherwise you may create a duplicate of the class in both online and face-to-face formats
- **Don't get carried away with the numerous opportunities that technology offers.** Ensure that the online component remains relevant to learning and not distracting 'gimmicks' - students will see through this very quickly. Establish what it is you want students to learn, and whether an online component is likely to enhance or improve this experience. It is useful to view similar case studies or to speak to colleagues about their experiences, or refer to other relevant Learning to Teach Online episodes and case studies that deal with choosing technology, designing assessment, using online resources etc
- **Establish what activities would benefit from or would be better suited to technology.** Move these to the online context and then enrich the key activities that benefit from a face-to-face environment. (Refer to the "Establish which components are better suited to the online environment" section later in this document for some useful strategies)
- **Start slowly.** Introduce one online component to your blended class or program; assess and evaluate its merits at the end of the semester; adjust accordingly what you have learnt; and then gradually add more online components or more depth to the existing component if it is required
- **Clearly explain to students and other teaching staff why you are introducing an online component.** Outline what you hope to achieve, and what the benefits might be for them. Students will usually be more willing to try new methods of learning when they can see the point, and it will help to engender an environment of cooperation and communication between students and their teacher

Fully online classes

- **Develop content and structure for your class that is specific to online learning and teaching.** For example, how students communicate and use their time in an online context is different - engaging for shorter amounts of time more frequently is common. Therefore preparing shorter, more frequent lectures and putting time frames on discussion topics is useful. Resources should be media rich, easily accessible and preferably downloadable, etc (refer to related Learning to Teach Online episodes for more guidance)
- **Start slowly.** Don't introduce too many different technologies and features at first – keep it simple until the confidence and experience of both students and teachers is established. Assess and evaluate the merits at the end of the semester and adjust accordingly if required
- **Ensure that you are familiar and have experience using the technologies and features well before you start teaching the class.** This way any difficulties and problems can usually be averted or resolved quickly. Students will expect you to be an expert in using the technology to be able to help and guide them

Constructively aligning assessment with learning outcomes

As with face-to-face teaching, online and blended classes need to be '[constructively aligned](#)' (a term developed by [Professor John B. Biggs](#)) to achieve maximum learning benefits and outcomes.

Constructive alignment means that all aspects of your class - from aims, learning outcomes, lectures, activities and assessable projects - are all directly related to each other, and support a progressive (or scaffolded) system of learning throughout the duration of your course. Assessment is typically a series of progressive activities that act as stepping-stones that allow students to gradually build, apply and evaluate knowledge, with each task directly relating to particular learning outcomes.

Adding an online component to your class can add greater complexity to the constructive alignment process, and it requires careful planning to ensure that any online component adds value, is constructively aligned with the class curriculum, and assists the process of learning.

Useful strategies for constructive alignment of an online curriculum

It is best to start with basic curriculum design regardless of technology:

- **Consider the scope of your class and determine what it is you want students to learn** by writing a few concise and clear learning outcomes
- **Focus on these main learning outcomes for the class** and identify specific information, knowledge or skills that you expect students to learn to satisfy each outcome
- **Establish how students will be able to demonstrate their learning.** This will help make learning outcomes specific in terms of their assessment, and will also assist in determining learning activities and designing course assessment
- **Design the assignments and activities that would facilitate these outcomes.** One invaluable tool for helping to determine what types of student action can best support the type and depth of learning required is Bloom's taxonomy. A brief yet useful guide to help design assessment tasks using [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) has been prepared by the Teaching and Educational Development Institute at The University of Queensland
- **Consider the range of learning activities and teaching approaches** that engage students in reading, thinking and discussing the content, and which support students in successfully completing tasks and ultimately achieving learning outcomes. This may include readings, lectures, activities, discussion topics, etc. This can then serve as a prompt for establishing which activities could be best served by an online component, and integrated into the curriculum

Integrating Digital Literacy

Digital literacy as defined by the [University of Illinois](#) is 'the ability to use digital technology, communication tools or networks to locate, evaluate and create information and to understand and use this information in multiple formats. It includes the ability to read and interpret media, to reproduce data and images through digital manipulation, and to evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from digital environments'.

It is often assumed that since the '[Net Generation](#)' of students have grown up with ready access to technology, and are familiar with social networking, that they are comfortable and proficient in using technology in their learning. However, this generalisation is often not true for many students.

While many students use social networking media such as [Facebook](#) many are less familiar with the use of other [Web 2.0 technologies](#) such as [Twitter](#), [Flickr](#), and [Blogger](#) for example, and often have minimal experience of using these in a learning (as opposed to social) context. It is important therefore to firstly provide adequate training for students and teachers on how to use these technologies, and to clarify how and why they will be used in your class or learning environment. Developing and integrating such support into the online curriculum is a good way to help students successfully engage and benefit from online or blended learning.

Useful strategies for integrating digital literacy into curriculum

- ***Incorporate some scaffolding that supports or develops digital literacy into your class.*** Include tasks that provide a foundation in developing necessary skills. This can be done over the duration of the semester, or over a series of classes within a program
- ***When introducing a new online technology, allocate sufficient time beforehand to fully brief students*** (often in a 'step-by-step' process) on how to set up and use that technology or software
- ***Provide ongoing support.*** Prepare written instructions (online or hard copy) that reiterate what was introduced in the aforementioned briefing to allow students to revise any steps they may have forgotten. Provide a 'Question and Answer' thread in a discussion board where students can ask questions, and ensure that you respond promptly. A "Frequently Asked Questions" document may also be helpful
- ***Before teaching your class, ensure you are familiar with, and have experience in the technology or online environment that you are introducing.*** This allows you to pre-empt and possibly divert any problems, and answer or resolve issues more promptly

Establishing which components are better suited for a blended learning environment

Establishing which components are better suited to an online or face-to-face environment allows you to maximise the effectiveness of your curriculum, and increase student engagement. In a blended scenario, face-to-face and online learning activities should be relevant to, and complement one another - it is important not to double up so that you end up teaching a fully online and face-to-face class simultaneously. Similarly, the online component does not have to be used for the full duration of the class – it can be used at critical times during the semester when an online activity addresses or enhances a specific learning experience. Selecting which learning activities should take place online depends on the discipline, and the size and type of class, however there are some strategies that could be beneficial and relevant to most.

Useful strategies for designing online components for blended learning

Establish which learning activities or content do not require a face-to-face environment. These are often administrative matters, resources or activities that students can revisit in between face-to-face class meeting times. These could include some of the following:

- **Administrative matters:** Documents such as class outlines, important dates, contact information, occupational health and safety policies, student class lists, class evaluations, student expectations, frequently asked questions, schedules, programs, etc
- **Resources:** Lectures, study notes, lecture notes, reading lists, web links, etc
- **Procedural documents:** Project briefs, assessment criteria, 'how to' instructions or demonstrations, etc

Following this, determine which learning activities could be enhanced by being conducted within an online environment. These could include:

- **Assignments:** Self paced assessment and revision modules, quizzes, past exam papers, online tutorials, examples of good practice, submission of assessment, etc
- **Feedback:** Peer feedback, audio or written feedback by teacher, etc
- **Collaboration:** Discussions, group work, etc
- **Preparation work:** Resources and activities that students can use to prepare for face-to-face classes
- **News items:** Weekly instructions and motivating comments from teacher
- **External involvement:** Visiting lecturers or guests, collaboration or input from students in institutions located in other states or countries, industry participants, etc

Conclusion

Careful planning is one of the most important component of teaching online. A well planned and carefully balanced online curriculum is much easier to manage, and greatly reduces the potential for frustration and confusion during a student's online learning process. This document is designed to give you some starting points for planning your online class, but as the option for teaching online are great and varied, it is not intended to be a comprehensive guide. Rather, it is hoped that watching the video component of this episode, and reading this PDF, will inspire you to investigate other Learning to Teach Online episodes and case studies, to learn about in-depth, other relevant issues that will help you in planning your own online class.

Additional reading*

Educating the Net Generation. (2005). D. G. Oblinger & J. L. Oblinger (Eds.) Available from <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen>

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McArthur, I., McIntyre, S., & Watson, K. (2007, 12 July 2007). [Preparing Students for the Global Workplace: An Examination of Collaborative Online Learning Approaches](#). Paper presented at the ConnectED: International Conference on Design Education 2007, Sydney, Australia.

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Prensky, M. (2001a). [Digital natives, digital immigrants](#). *On the Horizon*, 9(5).

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**Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access*

Acknowledgements

Interview and Production: *Simon McIntyre and Karin Watson*

Camera and Edit: *Creative Development – L&T@UNSW*

COFA Online would like to extend a special thank you to the students, academics and institutions who generously donated their time and expertise to this episode:



Associate Professor Rick Bennett

Head, COFA Online and Founder, The Omnium Research Group

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To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

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About the project

The [Learning to Teach Online](#) project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

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Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.



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