



5 Strategies for Designing and Delivering High-Quality Online Instruction

Learn how to take advantage of the online
learning landscape from a university professor

The era of online learning is here. Are you prepared to engage learners?

As online learning programs spring up across the web, instructors are challenged to deliver quality courses that draw on the strengths of the online environment and ensure meaningful learner interactions and outcomes. Nearly anyone with a website can set up an educational content delivery system, but not everyone can establish rigorous and respectful online learning communities.

Top Suggestions from Strategies 1 and 2:

1. A successful course incorporates guest speakers and engages learners by identifying and sharing fresh, relevant course material.
2. Instructors should challenge learners to do something with the knowledge they gain in online courses and encourage alternative ways of connecting theory to practice.

Rather than recreating the traditional lecture model, instructors have an opportunity to engage a more diverse and geographically dispersed set of learners in new forms of interaction. When instructors are creative and flexible, new online learning tools extend and transform existing educational practices. Online, learners and instructors can quickly access emerging information, new presentation tools and web conferencing systems to collaborate, share ideas and practice new skills in supportive virtual forums.

5 ways for instructors to design, deliver and differentiate high-quality online courses:

1. Keep online courses “out of the box.”

Online learning material should be refreshed regularly. Unless learners are studying historical works or tried-and-true theories, they want — and deserve — exposure to the latest events, research and ideas. Although it may be tempting to save time and money by using material from prior learning modules, instructors build credibility by adding new course material on a regular basis.

In fact, a key strength of the online learning environment is the access it provides to current events and research. More traditional learning texts can be supplemented with relevant news stories, recently released video posts and links to additional web resources. And new course material shouldn't just come from instructors.

A successful course incorporates guest speakers and engages learners by identifying and sharing fresh, relevant course material. Instructors can assign learners to post recent videos, texts and images that respond to course topics and questions. Learner-generated examples can then be used as resources for future online learning modules.

2. Connect the virtual and the actual.

Online learning should break down barriers between technologically mediated environments and direct face-to-face interactions. Instructors should challenge learners to do something with the knowledge, skills and tools they gain in online courses. For example, learners in an online course might engage in simulated meeting facilitation and apply this knowledge to an actual workplace meeting.

Top Suggestions from Strategies 3, 4 and 5:

3. Online instructors should provide frequent and detailed feedback in live sessions or weekly posts.
4. Instructors play a critical role in helping learners take advantage of peer interactions.
5. For smaller classes, instructors should consider facilitating live sessions with all course participants on a regular basis. For larger classes, instructors may wish to facilitate only a handful of live sessions.

Then they can return to the online learning community to share, analyze and critique their experiences. Instructors should welcome and encourage alternative ways of presenting actual workplace experiences based on available online tools. Learners might record and upload video clips from meetings and events, make online presentations or provide links to relevant work products. In this way, both virtual and actual environments are integrated to connect theory to practice and reinforce new knowledge.

3. Provide feedback early and often.

Constructive feedback is critical in an online environment where learners and instructors are less likely to interact immediately after an exam or assignment is completed. In face-to-face courses, instructors often watch body language or facial expressions as they assess learner accomplishment or frustration. Learners have the opportunity to come to class early or stay late to review feedback with instructors.

Online instructors should compensate for this limitation by providing frequent and detailed feedback, sharing models of successful discussions and assignments and summarizing common learner strengths and problems in live sessions or weekly posts. Instructors should also provide a great deal of concrete feedback on initial assignments so that learners gain a clear sense of course expectations and receive direction and resources to support future assignments.

After exams, instructors should hold office hours via live session or real-time chat to respond to student questions. Instructors can also reduce the incidence of plagiarism by becoming familiar with learner work, raising specific questions and requiring learners to complete assignment revisions.

4. Promote learner interaction.

The online environment offers flexible forums for learners around the world to collaborate and engage in ongoing dialogue. Learners have a chance to communicate with each other via posts, chats or live video outside of a predetermined space and time. By sharing relevant experiences and resources, they often learn more from each other than they do from an instructor.

But instructors play a critical role in helping learners take advantage of peer interactions. Without effective facilitation, online course discussions may begin to look more like political blogs with lengthy diatribes and few critical questions or revelatory moments. Whenever possible, instructors should develop assignments and discussion questions that encourage learners to think critically and adopt alternative perspectives on a problem, issue or choice. Instructors should coach learners on how to ask constructive questions and challenge them to develop alternative scenarios and argue from multiple perspectives.

This does not mean, however, that learners will always come to common or comfortable understandings. Although instructors should model and ensure respectful interactions, learning often requires some degree of difference or conflict. This means instructors need to think carefully about when to jump into an online discussion and when to get out of the way. Effective online instructors are facilitators — not referees.

5. **Make time for face time.**

Advances in communication technology move online learning beyond discussion forums and chat boards. Instructors can hold live web conferences that integrate interactive lectures, student presentations and course discussions. Web conference technology allows instructors to incorporate lecture slides with audio and video resources while engaging learners via video, phone and chat.

With some practice, this becomes much simpler than it sounds. These sessions can be recorded and posted for learners who are unable to participate or wish to review lectures in preparation for an upcoming assignment or exam. Instructors can also hold face-to-face office hours or question-and-answer sessions with new web conference technology.

For smaller classes, instructors should consider facilitating live sessions with all course participants on a regular — even weekly — basis. For larger classes, instructors may wish to facilitate only a handful of live sessions for project groups or breakout sections. Instructors can also encourage face-to-face interaction by assigning activities that require regular collaboration and asking learners to post brief recordings from their live meetings.

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About the contributor



Sara McClellan researches organizational change, online learning and collaboration. She earned her PhD in Organizational Communication at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Sara is an organizational communication consultant specializing in education and public planning. She also instructs online and intensive graduate courses for the University of Southern California's Price School of Public Policy.



Citrix Online Division

7414 Hollister Avenue
Goleta, CA 93117
U.S.A.
T +1 805 690 6400
info@citrixonline.com

Media inquiries:

pr@citrixonline.com
T +1 805 690 2969

Citrix Online Europe Middle East & Africa

Citrix Online UK Ltd
Chalfont Park House
Chalfont Park, Gerrards Cross
Bucks SL9 0DZ
United Kingdom
T +44 (0) 800 011 2120
europe@citrixonline.com

Citrix Online Asia Pacific

Level 3, 1 Julius Avenue
Riverside Corporate Park
North Ryde NSW 2113
Australia
T +61 2 8870 0870
asiapac@citrixonline.com

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