Guidance for Online Courses

(Current as of August 2024)

Federal guidance on student interaction in online courses

Guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Education went into effect on July 1, 2021.

These guidelines require synchronous and asynchronous online courses to include substantive and regular interaction between instructors and students. Courses must be delivered to adequately engage students through teaching, learning, and assessment and facilitate two-way engagement with students.

Online courses should contain at least one hour of active faculty-student interaction per credit hour per week - ideally spread out during multiple sessions.

This interaction should include at least two of the following:

- Interactive feedback regarding a student's coursework (examples below)

- Responses to student questions about course content

- Facilitated group discussions about course content or competencies

- Virtual or in-person office hours

- Other instructional techniques that provide similar engagement to an in-class setting

- Direct instruction (synchronous interactive sessions)

What are some ways in which faculty can meet these requirements?

- Use web conferencing tools integrated into Canvas, such as [Webex in Canvas (docx)](#) or [MS Teams (pdf)](#).

- Hold online [student office hours](#) during scheduled times that meet your student's needs; see [effective practices for student office hours (pdf)](#). You may designate times using [Canvas Scheduler](#) or the [Office Hours functionality of Webex](#) within Canvas.

- Enable [Canvas Chat](#) for immediate feedback, host text-based consultations, engage with students outside class meetings, etc.

- Set up regular [Announcements](#) to go out automatically at strategic points. Topics may be providing tips to succeed on upcoming assignments, notifying about upcoming project timelines or extensions, connecting students to [Cyclone Support](#), and different communication strategies (e.g., short videos) to ensure everyone is well–informed.

- Create [peer-review assignments](#) and monitor the quality of peer feedback.

- Provide synchronous opportunities for class interaction, such as using [MS Teams](#) or [Webex](#) breakout rooms for small group discussion.

- Create multiple practice [quizzes](#) and example problem sets that students can complete in their own time, then spend part of your synchronous time demonstrating problems students had the most difficulties solving, as determined by the [Canvas Quiz Statistics](#).

Do simple adjustments to traditional teaching methods qualify as "substantive interaction" between the student and instructor?

- No. Posting a video of pre-recorded lectures or providing lecture materials online does not count as substantive interaction. To be considered as such, the instructor might:
  - Require students to watch the lecture ahead of time and then participate in a live text or video chat
  - Include self-assessment questions for a set of pre-recorded lectures. Use student performance on the questions to guide content covered in an office hour session.
- Simply assigning a grade to an assignment does not constitute interactive feedback. The instructor should also do one or more of the following:
  - Provide each student with comments unique to their submission;
  - Utilize mastery paths in Canvas to help students explore additional materials related to the topic;
  - Summarize common issues students are experiencing using a video, announcement, email, or discussion, and distribute to the whole class.

Best Practices for Teaching Online

- Use the ISU Course Template (preview) in Canvas. It helps create accessible courses with ISU branding and can be adapted to different formats. Includes Home page, Syllabus, Start Here module, example content, and "How to Customize Your Canvas Course" resource.
- Ensure that your course is designed for accessibility, ISU Digital Accessibility Toolkit.
- In an online course, students may lack the traditional class structure of "going to class." Establish clear course learning objectives, align content delivery, and set assignment due dates at the start of the semester to provide a clear pathway for the student learning process.
- Use various methods to deliver course content, including mixing short discussions, collaboration exercises, video clips, and hands-on exercises with text or brief video lectures.
- Be mindful of the amount of work you assign to students. Sometimes, efforts to increase engagement inadvertently significantly add to students' workload.
- Schedule multiple assessments, including several low-stakes assessments throughout the semester.
- Create a feeling of community by acknowledging student contributions, providing positive reinforcement, sharing personal experiences, helping students share ideas with peers, and encouraging networking.

What Additional Resources Are Available?

- The CELT Teaching Online Toolkit (pdf) for more effective strategies and best practices.
- Review more ideas in the CELT Teaching Online Engagement Strategies (docx).
- Teaching online comes with unique opportunities. CELT is here to help you create an engaging, student-centered learning environment; please email us at celt-help@iastate.edu.

For questions or more information, please contact us at Academic-Programs@iastate.edu.