

Guiding Principles of Effective Blended and Online Course Design



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Guiding Principles of Effective Blended and Online Course Design

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The following principles have been curated from current research and scholarship about effective blended and online course design. This is a working document that is intended to spark conversation about blended and online learning and introduce practical strategies for consideration as educators design quality online learning experiences. It is meant to be shared, used and adapted based on the specific needs of local contexts.

Many of these principles transcend learning modalities and can be applied in face-to-face, blended, and online learning contexts. Therefore, we have incorporated practical examples for different contexts. The implementation of these principles will vary by modality and discipline and may be broadly useful in decision-making related to the design and delivery of high-quality blended and online courses.

Relevance: Promote student-centered learning by incorporating activities and assessments that are relevant to students’ lives and academic development; provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to ‘real-world’ situations and contexts; build upon pre-requisite knowledge and skills to increase the visibility of student capacity and autonomy in their learning experience.

Principle in Practice

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Student-centered learning	Ask students to submit questions or topics of interest that they would like to explore during the course and incorporate these questions and topics into the course.	Have students map their learning goals to the outcomes of the course and facilitate an online discussion about shared learning goals within the class.
Practical application	Allow students to demonstrate learning in different ways, such as choosing which types of activities and assessments they complete or how they go about solving a problem.	Pair asynchronous learning with synchronous labs or sessions with peers and the teaching team to provide support and guidance.
Build upon existing knowledge	Establish in-person peer-study groups to support students at varying levels of skill development.	Create online peer-study groups where students facilitate discussions and/or learning activities.

Engagement: Create collaborative activities that encourage active learning, reflection, interaction, and peer-to-peer learning, support, community-building, and feedback; ensure that members of the instructional team are regularly present and active in the course; engage and involve students in their learning so that they can practice, synthesize, make meaning of and construct knowledge for themselves.

Principle in Practice

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Collaborative learning	Integrate regular activities into class time to encourage dialogue such as Think-Pair-Share activities.	Leverage online discussions or break-out rooms to have students work in small groups.
Be present	Interact with students during in-class activities and answer questions. Have regular office hours.	Be active and present in the course by participating in online discussions, having synchronous sessions, sending out weekly updates and reminders, and providing timely feedback on assessments and activities.
Provide feedback	Invite students to provide feedback on how they are learning in the course, what they are doing to foster their own learning, and what could be improved to enhance their learning.	Create D2L rubrics and post assignment instructions early in the semester. Create a FAQ discussion in D2L to answer common questions. During Zoom sessions, use break-out rooms for students to provide each other peer feedback on their draft work.

Balance: Develop a course roadmap that shows students how the learning activities and assessments are connected and when they will be completed; use an even distribution of learning activities and assessments throughout the course; incorporate a variety of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities that provide opportunities for students to practice and demonstrate their learning in the course.

Principle in Practice

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Roadmap	Have students work in pairs or small groups to create a week-by-week workplan of the course based on the course syllabus.	Use the checklist feature in D2L to let students know what learning activities and assessments need to be completed each week in the course.
Even distribution	Consider including assignments or quizzes in the first half of the course so that assessments are not too heavily weighted at the end.	If there are larger assignments in the course, consider splitting them into stages so students keep up with the course (cumulative assignments).
Practice	Use small group discussions in class to critique examples or provide feedback on learning activities and components of assessments.	Put practice quizzes in D2L for students to practice questions and develop skills before the exam-based assessments.

Alignment: Intentionally connect learning outcomes, activities, and assessments; select technologies and tools that are suited for the course activities and content; sequence and offer multiple opportunities for learning, application, and skills development.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Connect course learning outcomes to activities and assessments	Present lesson outcomes at the beginning of each in-class lesson to provide context for student learning, activities and content.	Post module learning outcomes for each module in the course. Leverage the online assessment tools in D2L for both formative and summative assessments.
Suitable technologies and tools	Create effective presentations by incorporating visuals, readability, and contrasting colours.	Create or find video content. Organize the D2L course logically by breaking into chunks or modules. Use a variety of technologies to allow students to demonstrate their learning in the most effective way.
Multiple modes of engagement	Plan in-class activities that promote deep learning, collaborative learning, and application of course material.	Use a variety of content delivery methods such as articles, short videos, and graphics that provide multiple options for students to access content online.

Inclusivity: Include intercultural examples and content; identify resources and materials that represent diverse voices; recognize and incorporate diverse ways of knowing and learning into activities and assessments; co-create norms for course participation and engagement that promote a sense of belonging for all members of the learning community.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Intercultural perspectives	Revisit existing course content and identify opportunities to update readings, videos, or other multi-media content from new or different perspectives in the field.	At the beginning of the term, share where you are physically located and invite students to do the same so that content and discussions can be relevant to students' localized environments.
Diverse representation	Invite guest speakers to present course content and create new opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives, such as other ways of knowing or doing.	Leverage Zoom and D2L to support guest presenters from other parts of the world to connect via Zoom and in the D2L discussion to answer questions and engage with the students.
Co-creation of norms	Small group activities provide a low-pressure way for students to form a community. Provide some structure for group activities in-class and teach students how to participate in small groups and	Review institutional zero-tolerance policies and engage with students to co-create a list of shared values or guidelines during the first class and post the list where students will see

	promote shared leadership within groups.	regularly, such as the home page of D2L.
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Equity: Incorporate multimedia content that creates various modes of engagement, representation, and expression of learning; anticipate and reduce potential barriers for limited access; provide access to technological, learning, and wellness supports and resources; create transparent assessment practices and criteria that promote fairness.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Use of media	Check with students in class to make sure they can see and hear you and any presented material.	Post media requirements in the course outline to ensure students have access to course material and can engage in online sessions.
Reducing barriers	Use Open Education Resources (OERs) and materials freely available online for course readings	Utilize lower cost options that may be available through open textbook collections or through campus platforms. This can reduce barriers and enable a richer learning experience for all students.
Transparency	Provide class-time for students to review assessment rubrics or grading criteria with peers and clarify areas of confusion.	In the online course shell, provide exemplars from previous terms or templates that students can use to prepare for assessments.

Accessibility: Choose learning technologies, tools and learning materials that are available to students at no cost or through the institution, wherever possible; conduct regular “technology audits” to ensure accessibility to tools and content; provide multiple pathways for communication between students and the instructional team.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Selecting technologies and materials	Keep in mind that not all students have a laptop that they can bring to class. Consider learning technologies that can be used on a smart phone or provide materials in class.	Provide students with tutorials and guides that explain how to use the learning technologies that you have chosen for the course.
Technology audits	Interact with course content with students during class-time, modelling the use of tools or application of skills that students are learning.	Periodically check digital content and resources to ensure that links are active and accessible.
Pathways of communication	Establish clear communication pathways between you and your students, such as office hours, email, or phone preferences, and contact information for the teaching team.	Have members of the teaching team sign on to Zoom 15 minutes before or after synchronous sessions to answer questions and connect with students

Flexibility: Consider course structures that allow for flexible deadlines, extensions or changes as needed; offer students a choice in learning activities and/or assessments; streamline the use of technology by choosing platforms that are user-friendly and supported by the institution.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Changes and adaptability	Include a course outline statement about how to request extensions or discussion modifications to assessments with the teaching team.	Communicate changes to deadlines or assessment details via multiple channels, such as the News tool in D2L and class-wide emails.
Student choice	Allow students to co-create questions or topics used in an activity or assessment with instructor approval.	Break assessments down into smaller components and allow students to drop the lowest-scored item at the end of the term.
User-friendly tools	Select learning technologies and tools that students can use in and out of class to ensure a continuous learning experience.	

Integrity: In collaboration with students, set clear expectations for engagement and interaction within the learning environment; provide clear guidelines about group and individual activities and assessments; proactively engage students in conversations about academic integrity in the context of the course modality, discipline, and institution.

Scenario	Face-to-Face	Blended/Online
Communicate expectations	Communicate expectations on the first day of class, review the course outline, and discuss academic integrity.	Provide students with examples of academic integrity within your disciplinary context or exemplars from similar assessments in previous terms.
Guidelines for group and independent work	Clearly articulate when collaboration is appropriate and provide grading criteria for group and individual projects.	Create channels for peer-to-peer engagement that include members of the teaching team, such as a MS Teams chat where GATs can answer questions as they arise.
Discuss academic integrity	Facilitate discussions about academic integrity during class time and answer student questions as they arise.	Post academic integrity statement in D2L and create a discussion topic where students can ask questions and the teaching team can provide answers.

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