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Best practices for teaching an online course

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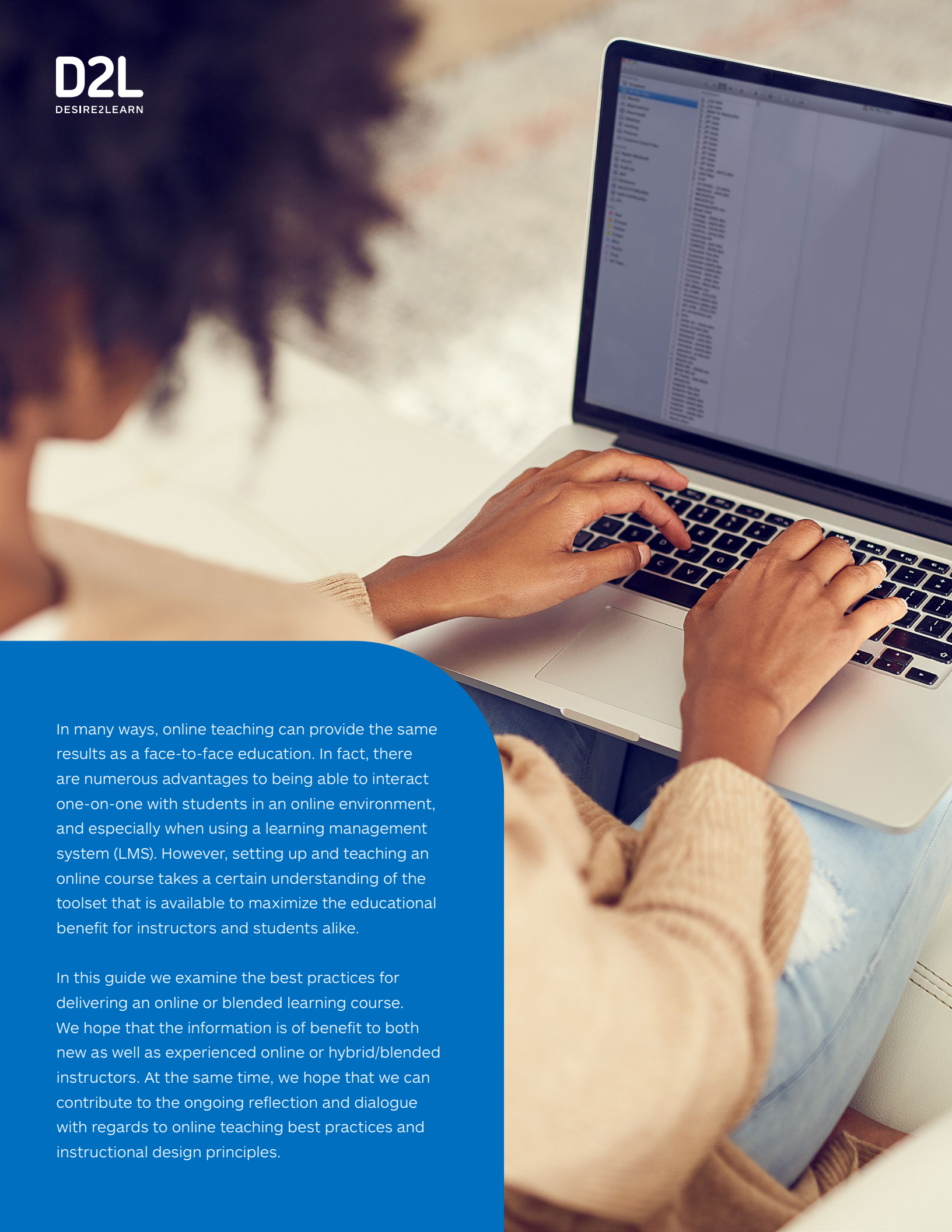

In many ways, online teaching can provide the same results as a face-to-face education. In fact, there are numerous advantages to being able to interact one-on-one with students in an online environment, and especially when using a learning management system (LMS). However, setting up and teaching an online course takes a certain understanding of the toolset that is available to maximize the educational benefit for instructors and students alike.

In this guide we examine the best practices for delivering an online or blended learning course. We hope that the information is of benefit to both new as well as experienced online or hybrid/blended instructors. At the same time, we hope that we can contribute to the ongoing reflection and dialogue with regards to online teaching best practices and instructional design principles.

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Preparing instructors for online teaching

Technology is most useful when it allows instructors to do what they do best: teach. In online platforms, instructors must be prepared to work with new technologies and consider the unique nature of online teaching pedagogy. They are instrumental in helping design course strategies by aligning learning paths with their own expertise and teaching experience. They will be able to better inform the course structure to ensure the design is easy to use and the navigation makes sense for their students.

For example. An instructor will know exactly when in a course a piece of information may require clarification using a PDF diagram or a video clip. They can decide upon the best time to introduce a short quiz in order to gauge student learning. They may choose to include a short video of themselves to provide an audio/visual aid for their students. These are elements that are second nature in an online environment and instructors can help determine the best way to take advantage of them.

Using the LMS for professional development. Providing instructors with professional development in technology use is an essential task before introducing new education technology or upgrading to a higher functioning LMS. It's a great time to actually use your new LMS to deliver this professional training. Not only will it help instructors to learn the technology, it will encourage empathy with their students who will also be using the system. For administration, this can save on the cost of running a professional development program through another system while providing useful data to track and monitor the progress, adoption levels, and more through the LMS.

Building towards the future. As proficiency in online course development increases, instructors can become more involved in course creation. Not only does this provide instructors with the ability to express freedom and creativity in their education delivery, but it also helps to free up resources for your teams dedicated to doing the design work. Using HTML templates allows instructors to maintain the look and feel of your institution's branding and content requirements, while at the same time, provides a consistent experience for students.

Online course design

In order to create an engaging and successful course, it's important to always consider the point of view of the student. Student-centered learning means that technology should make things as easy and as stress-free as possible to prevent potential set-backs and barriers to completion. When designing an online course, it's important that course materials, activities, assignments, quizzes, and assessments all align with course outcomes. The look and feel of the course design can also have an impact on student success. Consistency is key. This means that course information, discussion tools, and communication from the institution and instructor are located in the same place throughout every course.

For example. When providing a course calendar, students will face less confusion when there is a consistent pattern for assignments and due dates. They'll have a better chance at keeping up to date on their studies and be less likely to miss important milestones. The same goes for providing consistent terminology across all courses. The less confusion the better.

Preparing students. Instructors can help students acclimatize to the online environment by including new discussion topics so learners can introduce themselves. Students have the opportunity to practice with and grow accustomed to new tools before grading begins. For example, students can create a word document in which they describe what they hope to get out of a course. Then they can upload it to an assignment drop-box and complete a quiz showing that they understand course rules and expectations. As well, instructors can record short video introductions of themselves to establish a face-to-face relationship as early as possible.

Course materials. Regardless of the type of material (HTML page, PDF, video, outside sources), it should be accessible from any device. An LMS that is web-based allows students to access course content and all the great interactive and rich content elements built into your courses. This means that there is more consistency in the learning experience, across devices, and across multiple courses. Students will likely have less trouble finding what they're looking for.

Considering universal design for learning. Not all LMSes can feature an accessibility checklist to help ensure that courses are built in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). With the right LMS, instructors can use accessibility tools to help make their job easier, while having a greater confidence that they're following standards according to institutional and governmental policies.

Delivering the course

Interaction and communication are key to providing a similar online experience as would be achieved in a face-to-face environment. Therefore, an LMS that supports strong communication tools is paramount to delivering an online course as effectively as possible. Here are a few ways that an LMS can support this high level of interaction.

Delivery of announcements or updates. Instructors can provide timely announcements to alert students about upcoming important dates. These can be distributed in many forms, such as email, or for better visibility, on the course homepage, so students can see them as soon as they log in. At the same time, an LMS with an activity feed allows instructors to quickly post updates on a social media-style interface where students visit most frequently.

Create space for collaboration. Especially important to online courses is the ability for students to participate in discussion groups. These can be formally arranged by instructors, or encouraged as spaces where students can interact and reflect upon their learning with their peers in less formal (think social media-style) forums.

Intervention when required. It's important that students receive timely feedback regarding their work. Communication through the LMS can occur even faster than in traditional classroom settings when both students and instructors are collaborating in a shared digital space. Students can benefit from having personalized, detailed feedback—and the more detail the better. In some cases, providing video or audio feedback may be appropriate, which is enabled through the system. The same is true for communicating through discussion groups to monitor peer-to-peer interactions to ensure that they're appropriate, respectful, and serve the desired learning outcomes.

Being present and proactive

The more engagement instructors have with students regarding their course progress, the better it is for the student's sense of belonging and participation. There may be assumptions associated with online learning that suggest an LMS to be an impersonal space. But the system allows instructors to be proactive with students, to be more present in their education, and to understand the daily struggles and challenges they may be facing. In an era where students of all ages participate in digital communities and online forums, an LMS echoes the personal interactions they're already engaging with.

Build a community. Consider the benefits of developing small group discussions, chat rooms, video conferencing opportunities that students can use to interact and support each other. Collaborative activities can help to establish a sense of community that is so valuable in traditional classroom settings, which can easily be enabled, monitored, and credited using a learning management system.

Communicate early. Instructors can easily provide students entering a course with an introductory video talking about the course as well as themselves. They can set up discussion forums for questions or concerns about the course and the class expectations. And they can provide students with easy access to email for personal or private questions. If a phone or video conferencing tool (with voicemail) is available for sharing, students will have yet another avenue for communication.

Communicate with administration. Students deserve continuity with their studies, but as can be the case, instructors may need to take some time away from the course. In the event that an instructor is unable to facilitate online instruction due to a circumstance such as an illness or other absence, they should make the situation aware to administration, department heads, advisors, etc. Arrangements should be made so that there is no interruption to a student's learning. Because the course is built inside the LMS, instructors can have more confidence that there will be less disruption to their students' studies during an absence. Substitute instructors are better supported since the course calendar, assignments, and instruction are maintained within the LMS.

Monitoring courses and student progress

If a student is showing signs of lagging or inactivity on the LMS, a faster response time can improve the likelihood that a student can be re-engaged. In fact, it's advised that intervention happen as **early as the last day of the first week of a course**. Reinforcing the need to participate can help to get a student moving forward again. If they continue to lag, this is a significant indication that something more pressing may be interrupting a student's progress. At this point, more direct methods of intervention may be required.

Alerts and communication. The institution can benefit from having a methodology in place to address student performance issues or absences. In some cases, advisors may have insight from student data drawn from the LMS that can reveal patterns in student behavior, such as missed assignments or deadlines. Whether it's through analytics or simply an instructor's observations, it's important that advisors be notified immediately about concerns.

Identifying issues with the course design. If, for example, a majority of the class scores particularly poorly on a given quiz, this might be a sign that the quiz was covering content that hasn't yet fully been absorbed by students. The same is true in the reverse situation where students all appear to score highly. The data provided through the LMS gives instructors a "heads up" about their class and allows them to take a closer look at the material to see if there were issues with the course design itself. Because the LMS allows for continuous improvement, changes to the course can be made with each passing session that serve to strengthen the course over time.

Fix any courseware problems. There is always the possibility that things can go wrong inside an online course. For example, there might be some broken links, or URLs that were active when the course was designed, but have not since been updated, or deleted by a third-party source provider (e.g. a YouTube video may have been taken down). Adjusting an online course can be easy through a what-you-see-is-what-you-get editor. So, it's a quick fix to address any problems with broken links, typos, or mistakes.

Continuous improvement

As described in the previous chapter, the LMS houses courses in a digital space. Therefore, any changes or improvements made today will serve to strengthen the overall course for future students. This gives educators an opportunity to make a significant impact on the students they might be teaching now, and the students they may teach 2-3 years down the road. Instructors should be excited about the future and will look to the technology as a means to improving the way that education is delivered. Collaboration between administration, faculty, staff, and students (and even future employers) will help to determine the most efficient and effective way to use an LMS.

Explore what worked. As instructors work through the school year, they will develop new ideas and innovative ways to deliver an education in an online space. Everyone can benefit from the sharing of these new teaching strategies and best practices. For example, if assigning badges appears to have motivated students in a particularly effective way, consider developing deeper levels of game-based and story-centered learning for students. Take what worked and build upon it. The LMS should be flexible to accommodate innovative ideas, even in small test environments such as for competency- or mastery-based education programs. The sky's the limit.

Learn from students. By analyzing assessment data, student performance, course evaluations, feedback from peers and colleagues, courses can be developed with renewed vigor and pedagogical strategy. Student surveys will convey the efficacy of teaching programs and education technology. How much do students desire consistency and reliability when using their LMS? What are the tools that they love and can't live without? Instructors are on the front line when it comes to compliments and complaints. They need to share their observations with administration to ensure that every stakeholder is getting the highest return on the technology investment.

Professional development. How does your institution help connect educators to their peers, both within their own institution and with others across the industry? Would they benefit from using the LMS for professional development as well as for the education of online students? Instructors might consider hosting webinars and online conferences to share what they're discovering and developing in their experiences.

Final advice to instructors

Teaching an online course is really an opportunity to reach learners in ways that were previously thought to be difficult or impossible. This is a great time to be part of the evolution of education and to bring your experience, your enthusiasm, your dedication to making education more attractive and attainable to more students. Take what you know and what you do best and work with your administrators, the design team, and your IT department to build courses that you can confidently share with your students.

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About D2L

D2L is the creator of Brightspace, a learning platform for associations who value member engagement as a driver of business success. Grow your membership with personalized learning experiences tailored to suit members' needs and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing that allows them to share their expertise and get feedback via video, audio, and inline annotations. The fully responsive design means they'll be able to learn anytime, anywhere, and on any device. With a fully open API Brightspace can easily integrate within your existing technology ecosystem, and smarter reporting will help you monitor performance and engagement so you can make informed decisions about training and development.

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