

# Preparing Students for an Online Class or Online Class Component

Before we talk about how to prepare your students to use your digitized and online materials, take a few minutes to reflect on your own experience as students, using the online resources we prepared for you:

**WHAT WAS DIFFICULT FOR YOU?**

**WHAT CONFUSED YOU?**

**WHAT WORKED WELL FOR YOU?**

**WHAT WILL YOU USE:**

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Probably the most difficult aspect of using online resources in teaching and learning is making sure that our students know what to do with the materials we have provided. When students *never* meet the class in realtime, the situation is even more complex. The task of socializing our students and ourselves to this new environment is a very large one, but it is one that we must

consider in every use of online course materials—whether we are teaching completely online or simply using online materials to enhance our realtime classes. We offer here a few guidelines to assist in your efforts to equip your students to deal with online materials, digitized materials, and online courses:

### **Hardware, Software, and Access Issues:**

1. If your students will need special hardware (a microphone, for example) or software (even free plugins such as Adobe Acrobat), be sure to let them know ahead of time. Provide information on where to find those materials which are available on the web.
2. Let your students know where to find hardware and software help—whom to call, when they can call, how much help you personally can be expected to give.
3. In preparing course materials, be aware that not all students have fast or sophisticated systems. Plan for a certain lowest common denominator, and then don't deviate from your standard.
4. When offering help, be aware that your system will not display a page or a document the same way your student's system does. So when a student says he can't find a link, and you say, "click the green button," you should know that what is a button on your screen may not be a button on your student's and what is green on your screen may appear an entirely different color on his or hers.
5. Offer materials in more than one format. Sometimes students have the hardware and software to deal with one sort of handout (Acrobat, for example) but not another (the student may not have Word-for-Windows).
6. Consider issues of access with respect to disability. Students may be blind and relying on screen readers to view course materials. Others may have hearing challenges so that audio files will not be accessible to them. Your media specialists on your campus will guide you in preparing course materials that conform to Americans with Disability Act standards and are accessible to all your students. By law, we are required to create course materials which are accessible to all.
7. Remember that many students will work from off campus (this is the beauty of online resources—we can stay home), so they may have very slow connections. Keep course materials speedy. Do not overuse video, large image or audio files, and unnecessary graphics.

### **Computer Competence and Information Literacy:**

1. Your students will have a wide range of online skills and software skills. Some will know the Office Suite, some will be adept at searching the web, some will know how to use graphics software. But all will have odd, uneven collections of skills—as we do.
2. In terms of teaching—especially if you are teaching a course entirely online—it is a good idea to build the acquisition of skills into your assignments. If you are covering public policy, for example, have students do a search of government documents online to answer a question or solve a problem. Be sure to offer guidance in online searching as part of the assignment, and encourage students to partner and help one another.
3. Remember that you don't have to provide all the software and internet instruction for your students. Hundreds of sites online provide such instruction; just point your students in the right direction, and give them a reason to go.
4. If you want your students to be able to deal with the information in your field effectively, you will probably find that they require skills that you did not need when you were an undergraduate. They may need to know how to use a database program, they may need to produce a webpage, they may need to be able to manipulate graphics. You might, to provide them with experience in these new ways of handling materials, consider asking them to do

some of their work in less traditional ways—produce a PowerPoint presentation, for example. When you give such assignments, it is effective sometimes to have students complete these assignments as members of groups since the array of talents and skills in a group will allow students to do what they may not individually possess the skills to do.

5. Another way to encourage computer competence and information literacy in your students is to offer assignments which may be completed in more than one way. If you want a report on current American investments in Southeast Asia, for example, you may allow students to do a traditional research paper, to offer a PowerPoint presentation, to build an interactive webpage with a database, or to compose a CD with a software like Director. In suggesting a range of possible production tools, you permit all students to complete the assignment, but you encourage them to develop new strategies for disseminating information.

### **Online Behavior**

1. Many folks have developed their online standards of behavior in chat rooms, on email discussion lists, and on electronic newsgroups. If you have ever participated in these forums, you know that behavior is not always of the highest and most kindly sort. Some of your students—but only a few—will have taken online courses, and they will be aware that online class behavior is very different from chatroom behavior. But others will need some help, so one of the first things you should plan for is a small introduction to “netiquette.”
2. Sites such as “The Core Rules of Netiquette” offer wonderful introductions for your students. Ask them to review a site like this before they enter into online dialogue with others. You may make an online discussion of the rules of netiquette a way to ensure that your students are all online, that they are paying attention, that they know how and where to find information, and that they are ready to go:

<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

3. Most of us worry about online cheating. It is probably best to create assignments which do not make cheating easy. Also, it is comforting to separate issues of identity and performance. You will be able to tell pretty quickly one student’s writing from another’s. They “sound” very unique in online communications. So when student A no longer sounds like student A, you may suspect that some else is handing in student A’s work. The real issue is identity. Is student A really Mary Smith. One thing to remember is that we rarely check id’s in class, so Mary Smith in a realtime class may not even *be* Mary Smith.

### **Faculty Attitudes:**

1. The most valuable attitude you can cultivate in this new teaching and learning environment is patience—patience with yourself, with your students, with the resources, with your support staff. Things will go wrong. Materials will be lost. Students will complain. Patience will serve you well in these moments.
2. Another great asset is tolerance—especially for student lapses. One thing to keep in mind is this: we all have heard the dead grandmother excuses about lost or late work so many times that we can see them coming a mile away. But if your students make excuses about late or missed work and these excuses involve technology (the computer crashed, I couldn’t log on, my ISP disconnected me), take them seriously—at least for a few more years. You never know, and some of the most odd and baffling things happen online. Your tolerance of their missteps will serve you well when *your* ISP disconnects you and you can’t upload the quiz you promised would be online by 9am.

3. Work with your students. Confer with them. In this venture, they are truly your colleagues. They love to help with these efforts, and they will roll up their sleeves and do a lot of the work for you if they see how much you are willing to learn from them. One assignment that is especially effective in classes of all kinds is having students do web searches for sites relevant to your field. Not only do students have a chance to evaluate sites, but they also have the opportunity to make discoveries which you can archive in your course materials and save for other students.
4. Don't be too hard on yourself. This is hard work.