Positive Online Teaching Practices

Whether you're new to online teaching or are experienced in the practice, the benchmarks below can enhance any course. These tips focus on excellent course design and development, presence, and positive practices in digital pedagogy. Many of these practices can also be effective in face-to-face or hybrid environments.

STUDENT ORIENTATION TO THE COURSE
Always orient students to the course and the LMS environment.

Homepage or Welcome Page
Include clear expectations, guidance for success in the course, clear instructions for getting started, and ways to connect with the instructor and other students.

Intuitive Navigation and Usability
For the best user experience, organize the navigation bar, and hide unused or irrelevant features. Modules are a great way to organize material. Pay special attention to clear and consistent naming conventions.

Overview Page for Each Week or Module
Add a brief overview page outlining a topic overview, expectations for the week, and checklist of assignments or activities.

Low-Stakes Assignment for the First Week
To allow students to become comfortable with the online environment and learning management system, incorporate a low-stakes assignment during the first week. Class introductions or a syllabus quiz are good examples.

CREATING COMMUNITY & SOCIAL PRESENCE
Developing a community online and feelings of trust is essential to student success and engagement.

Opportunities for Peer Interaction
Strategies for peers to interact, support, and learn from each other include discussion forums, video introductions, group work, and peer reviews.

Instructor Communication is Frequent and Open
Frequent touch points with the instructor helps to reduce student isolation. Use a combination of announcements, messages, discussion posts, and clear assignment feedback. A friendly written tone is important in creating approachability.

Instructor Video Posts
Use video posts to introduce topics or provide feedback. This mimics the face-to-face interaction often missing in online courses.

ENCOURAGING COGNITIVE PRESENCE
Cognitive presence opportunities allow for students to construct meaning and create shared knowledge.

Real-World Examples and Application
Using examples and assignments which students can apply to real-world scenarios and individual interests is key to creating engagement with the content, and intrinsic motivation.

Prompts Encourage Critical Thinking
Assignment prompts using appropriate Bloom's Taxonomy verbs for the learning level, task difficulty, and intended outcome. Bloom's Taxonomy is often used as a guide for advancing cognitive presence and encouraging higher level critical thinking.

Opportunities for Drafts or Revisions
When students have opportunities to revise and resubmit assignments, it triggers an important cognitive process by internalizing feedback and taking steps for improvement.

Opportunities for Peer Review
In addition to connecting students with each other, peer reviews allow students to learn from what others have done, and improve their own work in the process.

IMPROVING TEACHING PRESENCE
Teaching presence is the design, facilitation, and direction you set for the course.

Communication and Instructions are Clear
A communication plan is essential in online courses. Regularity and clarity are important in reducing confusion. Additionally, let students know prefered methods for contacting you, as well as how soon they can expect to hear back from you (i.e. within 24 hours).

Plan for Timely Assignment Feedback
Develop a plan for when students can expect assignment grades and feedback, and articulate this clearly to them. This can be communicated in the syllabus, or as an addition to each individual assignment prompt.

Rubrics are Detailed and Understandable
Rubrics can help provide learners with clear expectations for assignments, and additionally help eliminate confusion regarding grades and feedback. If rubrics are used, make sure they are detailed and clear.

Opportunities to Know the Instructor
Let students get to know you! This is more difficult in the online environment. Video introduction, photos, and infusing your own expertise and opinions where appropriate are helpful strategies. A conversational tone comes across as more approachable and can help students feel more comfortable more quickly.

ASSESSMENT
Each assessment should have a purpose in scope and method, and can be tied back to course outcomes.

Outcomes are Clear, Concise, Measurable
Course outcomes should be written to be clear, concise, and measurable. What should students be able to take away from the course and apply to future courses or a career?

Assignments are Purposeful and Convey "Why"
Let students understand the big picture "why" behind an assignment, and relate it to real-world situations if necessary. This creates more intrinsic motivation and relatability for students, which leads to higher chances of success.

Assessments are Frequent and Use Appropriate and Diverse Methods
Frequent assessments are important in online learning, as touchpoints with students each week. Appropriate online strategies and diversity in assignments increases engagement and cognitive thinking. Alternatives to written assignments include video presentations, synchronous video debates, infographics, or podcasts.

Outcomes and Assessments Reflect Appropriate Level of Mastery
Remember your students' experience and perspectives when developing assessments. Examples include: students' prior experience, prior knowledge, place within the program (early/mid/late), familiarity with each other (cohort vs. non-cohort), technological ability, etc.

Want to learn more? Check out these excellent resources to dig deeper:
- Online Learning Consortium's Insights Blog
- How to be a Better Online Teacher (by Flower Darby, Chronicle of Higher Education)
- Canvas Community, Tutorials, and Guides