

# High-Impact Teaching Practices for Online Instruction

## Overview

High impact practices are meant to establish a set of **shared expectations** and provide additional teaching strategies to support high quality instruction in all School of Professional Studies (SPS) courses. High impact practices are drawn from research on teaching and learning. The academic team or the faculty director of your program will also refer to these practices in assessing the learning environment of your course. Faculty development opportunities, course design best practices, and teaching best practices at SPS are centered around the high impact practices outlined in this document.

While good course design is a critical part of effective online teaching, design alone is not sufficient for student learning. Learning is a social process: the instructor's active facilitation of learning and of faculty-student and student-student interactions is essential for students' ability to engage with the course materials and meet course learning outcomes. Students consistently tell us that active engagement and regular feedback from their instructors were the factors most critical to their learning.

The SPS student body is quite diverse and represents a wide range of identities, backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Research has shown that students learn more effectively when they feel a sense of belonging in their learning community. Rather than ignoring differences, culturally responsive teaching "us[es] cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective" for all students (Gay, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching "recognize[s] the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning" (Gay, 2010) and is mindful of how the different subject positions of instructors and students can affect classroom dynamics. The high impact practices described below contribute to the overarching goals of **fostering inclusive** learning spaces, where students feel they can be authentic in their identities without fear of judgment or bias.

## Instructor Presence

You can help ensure a successful learning experience when you establish your presence in an online course. Instructor presence gives students confidence that you are guiding them through the course and monitoring their progress. Regular updates and interaction between you and your students indicate that you're updating the course along the way to meet their learning needs.

Instructor presence can be established and maintained through the following ways:

## Communication

- Through various channels on the course site, you can ensure a successful learning experience by practicing proactive course management strategies. Best practices for online teaching suggest:
  - List your contact information, with specific information about your availability and typical response time (use your NU (Northwestern University) email; sharing a phone number is optional).
  - Monitor assignment submissions and communicate with students to remind them of missed and/or upcoming deadlines. This is especially critical early in the course, to set clear expectations of student accountability to class deadlines and also to establish instructor presence and connectivity to support students that may struggle at first to engage. For example, reach out individually to students who are not engaging regularly or not turning in assignments to offer support and express concern.
  - Interact with students each week via announcements, sync sessions, and/or discussion boards. Post weekly announcements to welcome students to the course, introduce content for the coming week, summarize highlights of the previous week, or remind students of upcoming deadlines and course activities.
  - Check email daily; respond to questions (individual or group) within 24-48 hours. If you are unable to log into the course for several days or more (e.g., during professional travel), give prior notice to your students and to the administrative unit overseeing your course.
- Sync sessions are a key part of students' learning journey at SPS.
  - Allow for flexibility in responding to the needs of the class in the number of synchronous sessions held each term but hold at **least 3-5 live sync sessions** via Zoom during the quarter.
  - Synchronous sessions should be recorded and an announcement summarizing content and availability should be posted within 24 hours. If you need assistance in creating a plan for your synchronous sessions, schedule a meeting with a DL (Distance Learning) staff member at [Consultations](#).
- Encourage students to ask questions throughout the quarter individually and in group settings and take the time to respond. You can respond through announcements in Canvas or a direct Canvas message to individual students.
- When appropriate and as often as possible, provide extensive individualized feedback to students via text, video, or audio. See the [instructor and group feedback](#) areas of this document for more information.
- Ensure that your late policy is clearly stated in your syllabus and be consistent and considerate in applying it

## Community Building & Culturally Responsive Teaching

In an online environment where communication is largely asynchronous, it is especially important to foster a caring, inclusive learning community where diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives are valued. You should make an intentional effort to create a sense of classroom community and get to know each student and let the students get to know you and each other through course activities.

Culturally responsive teaching not only “recognize[s] the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning,” but also “teaches to and through the strengths of” students’ diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010). This can be especially beneficial to teaching adult students who bring varied personal and professional identities and experiences to the classroom. In addition, real world relevance in course activities is a way to reinforce culturally responsible teaching.

- Post a welcome announcement for the first day of the course in addition to your introductory video.
- Have students introduce themselves in a discussion board using text or video. Respond directly to each student in the introduction discussion and integrate students’ individual interests, skills, and experiences into the course as it progresses.
- Address students by name or by how they prefer to be addressed and use the students’ identified pronouns. Include your pronouns in your introduction/course information and ask students to include them as part of their introduction or student profile. ([Canvas How to Add pronouns guide](#))
- Encourage connections among students by fostering student-to-student communication within the introduction section and other discussions. Include questions that allow for personable and customized answers by students.
- Encourage students to use [Name Coach](#).
- Have any teaching assistants (if applicable) and co-instructors create a separate introduction in their own voice/space, making it clear that they are an additional distinct resource and source of instructor presence for the students.
- Be intentional with the classroom community on discussion of topics that may be provocative or controversial. Collectively establishing group agreements ahead of time for these interactions is recommended. Be clear to students that if they encounter harmful language or behavior in the learning space, they should bring it to your attention as soon as possible.
- Provide opportunities for students to connect their learning to their own knowledge and experiences and activities that foster peer-to-peer learning.
- Create an interest in understanding the relevance of the subject to the everyday or professional world.
- Encourage students to connect their own work experience and context to course materials.
- Post current articles or other resources relevant to the topic for students.

- Encourage students to share relevant scholarship and other resources with each other.
- Encourage involvement in professional associations through resources or end-of-course wrap up to further students' professional development.
- Provide opportunities for students to share with each other about professional work or activities related to course topics and goals.
- Instructors should share their own career path (if applicable) and any guidance they can offer to students evaluating career options.

## Discussion Facilitation

Through participation in discussion, you not only demonstrate instructor presence, but advance student thinking and reinforce course concepts. You should actively monitor discussion boards and respond as appropriate. This does not necessarily mean responding to every student's individual post every time, but rather, stepping in at appropriate times to ensure that the discussion is productive, and your instructor's presence is established when appropriate.

- Pose questions or introduce alternative ideas/viewpoints to push students' thinking and deepen discussion.
- Refocus the discussion if it goes off on tangents.
- Synthesize comments at some point in a discussion to emphasize and explain core course concepts, to highlight especially insightful student contributions, or to clarify common misunderstandings that arise.
- Create a respectful forum to test ideas (students express conflicting viewpoints, challenging each other) by reminding students to be open to new ideas and to be respectful of the words and opinions of others.
- Use practical examples to illustrate complex concepts.
- Respond to instructor-directed student questions on Canvas discussion boards within 48 hours.
- Be aware of, and mediate, power imbalances that may arise based on [social identities](#). For example, if male students are dominating discussion boards in a class with few female students, find ways to encourage female student participation and male student awareness of sharing discussion space. Or, if those with many years of professional experience are dominating group work assignments, make collaboration expectations clear.
- For discussion topics that may elicit strong reactions and divergent perspectives, be intentional about establishing group agreements that set clear expectations for respectful exchanges. For these weeks, be prepared to be more present in the discussion and step in as needed.
- If you notice harmful language or interactions (prejudiced, biased, belittling, shaming, or otherwise hostile), whether intentional or not, speak privately with the students directly involved, but also make an announcement to the whole class reminding them of group agreements and the impact of the harmful language or behavior (without naming or

calling out individual students). Reach out to your Assistant Director for guidance at any time.

## Instructor Feedback

Instructor feedback is essential to student learning. Feedback from instructors must be timely, as it reinforces engagement with the students and helps build trust. Feedback should also be **relevant and focused** on what the student should reinforce and what the student can do to improve. The purpose of feedback is not just to evaluate a specific performance, but to treat that performance as an occasion for further teaching and learning.

### Providing Individual Student Feedback

Understanding that feedback is a teaching opportunity, tailor your comments to engage with each student's ideas. Provide timely, relevant, and focused feedback that makes concrete suggestions for improvement on future assignments or work beyond the class.

- Establish and communicate clear criteria used to evaluate assignments (through a rubric, checklist, or written instructions).
- Enter a 0 for any missed assignments when grading, so that students are aware of their current grade status in the course.
- Provide opportunities for drafting and receiving feedback on drafts from you and/or peers before major assignments are due
- Make yourself available via telephone or video conference to talk students through their assignments and answer questions
- Respond thoroughly to assignments, with grades, in time for feedback to be applied to the next graded assignment or next stage of a larger project
- Grading and feedback should be provided to the student within 7-10 days of the assignment due date. Major assignments may have a longer timeline as appropriate.
- Provide comments to each student that engages with that student's ideas, noting strengths as well as suggestions for continued improvement/learning
- Focus feedback on the most relevant course concepts and skills (i.e., apply evaluative criteria consistently and fairly).
- Always remember the power of positive feedback. Constructively build on strong posts from students and affirm strengths.

### Providing Collective Feedback

At regular intervals, provide a progress report on course proceedings, summarizing key course concepts and insights, as well as clearing up misconceptions or confusion and addressing questions that have come up. This feedback helps guide students by highlighting what's most important, how students should approach assignments and projects, and how specific content is connected to course learning goals and outcomes. Strive to find ways to balance support and dissonance in groups.

- Summarize the weekly discussion and content, separately or in a combined announcement, email, or recording at the end of the module, highlighting key questions, themes, or ideas.
- Preview the weekly content in an announcement, email, or recording to help students transition from one week to the next.
- Reflect on the learning that you're observing in the course at key intervals.
- Use video conferences to conduct individual or team meetings.

## Group Work

Group work provides students with the opportunity to develop key communication and collaboration skills with real world relevance and allows students to demonstrate their strengths while working with others. Students may resist group projects due to scheduling difficulties with classmates, concerns over contribution levels, and being evaluated and graded based on others' work. Group project design should incorporate practices that alleviate student concerns and foster a positive learning environment.

- Provide a clear rationale and purpose for the group work, explaining how it aligns with course and program learning outcomes.
- Allow sufficient course time for students to develop their group work project. If appropriate, scaffold deliverables so that students can practice working together and holding each other accountable.
- Decide how you want to form groups and communicate that to students as part of the assignment. Canvas can randomly assign people to groups, but you may want to form groups based on student strengths, professional skills, or other criteria.
- Provide clear expectations, such as what the project involves, level of support provided, anticipated participation level for all students, and how the assignment will be assessed.
- Clearly state what will be assessed in a group assignment (the final project, the group process, or both). Some things to consider:
  - What percentage will be based on the assessment of final product vs. process?
    - How much weight will you give to student-provided evaluation?
      - Team evaluations: members evaluate the dynamics of the team.
      - Peer evaluations: members evaluate the contributions of their teammates.
      - Self-evaluations: member documents and evaluates their own contributions to the team.
    - What percentage of the group project will be based on the group performance vs. individual contributions?
- Encourage groups to come up with a "group charter" to establish agreements and commitments: where work will be done (asynchronous/synchronous), deadlines for intermediary steps, meetings, roles, etc. This can be integrated as part of the assignment.
- Foster productive group dynamics: Determine how large each group will be, establish rules for communication, and encourage peer to peer feedback within the group. Create a virtual space for each group to collaborate.
- Check in with the groups and provide feedback regularly.
- As with discussion board interactions, be mindful of power dynamics that may inhibit full participation by all students. For example, a more experienced professional may take over a project, or a student is seemingly being ignored or excluded because of a perceived weakness or difference. Reach out for guidance if you have questions about how best to intervene.

## **Culturally responsive Teaching**

- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 2nd ed. Multicultural Education Series (New York, N.Y.). New York: Teachers College