

Guiding Principles for Online Course Adaptations, Fall 2020 | Area of Focus

This document forms part of the University of British Columbia's Guiding Principles for Online Course Adaptations, first published in 2020. Learn more about the guiding principles and access the full document at keep-teaching.ubc.ca.

Active Engagement in Discussion/Lecture Courses (~30–60 students)

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How to use this document

This document employs a reflective structure: the questions our group asked, a brief critical commentary on the issue, a series of questions faculty can ask themselves, and a list of concrete examples of course design, teaching, and assessment strategies for traditional lecture/discussion courses of small- to mid-size.

Whether redesigning an existing course for online delivery or designing from scratch, it makes sense to begin with learning outcomes. Consider 'backward design' from there: revisit the steps from outcomes back to content, delivery and assessment to see what course elements are essential (and what could be re-formed for online delivery) and the kinds of assessments most likely to achieve desired outcomes. See this [resource on backward design from the CTLT's Course Design Intensive](#) for more information.

Key considerations for faculty members and departments

- How can we teach our existing courses in online formats?
- What constitutes 'instructional time' in online delivery when so much of classroom time is typically devoted to discussion and peer-to-peer interaction? How can we actively rethink the concept of 'instructional time' for both course design and teaching practices, taking into consideration faculty and student lecturing/preparation/learning time?
- What are optimal blends of synchronous/asynchronous delivery?
- How can we foster community and cohort building in an online environment, particularly in classes of this size? What are some strategies to encourage active learning, peer-to-peer collaboration, and communication in synchronous and asynchronous contexts?
- How can we reimagine assessment, including ways to cultivate academic integrity?

Rethinking instructional time, course design, practice and assessment

Long blocks of live or recorded 'lecture' material online are ineffective for student learning, and also significantly increase the workload burden of faculty and cognitive burden of students.

Few of us lecture for three straight hours even face-to-face; rather, we use discussion, breakout groups, and peer-to-peer interactions for a significant portion of our class time. In the online environment, our designated hours per week of 'instructional time' should likely include a mix of synchronous class time, recorded material, and asynchronous activities, which may utilize a variety of learning tools (discussion boards, peer feedback tools, quizzes, wiki building, breakout discussion groups, and other active-learning strategies). Instructional time may also include opportunities for students to do collaborative work in lieu of things that would have been done in-class, but distinct from students' 'preparation' time (e.g., doing assigned reading or completing independent assignments).

Instead of feeling pressured to 'fill the time' of an equivalent number of hours, instructors might instead be invited to undertake ['backwards design' \[see Chapter 1 in Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. \(2005\)\]](#), where one starts with the course Learning Outcomes, and creates designated paths to those outcomes within this online environment. Starting with a clear sense of the number of hours we expect students to spend on our course (keeping in mind a standard 5-course student load), ask yourself whether the traditional two-hours-prep-for-each-class formula is actually required to meet the learning objectives, or if learning outcomes can be met with less time spent on more meaningful forms of engagement. Requiring students to post ten times to a discussion board, for example, can feel like busywork and may not generate insightful collaboration. However, having smaller groups generate a collaborative document recording the insight from a self-scheduled 20-minute discussion group might create both more critical depth and a sense of community with less instructional time.

Under online conditions, we must recognize that not all students are in environments that can foster extended blocks of close focus. This does not mean that our courses should be less rigorous, but that instructors may rethink instructional time to include, in new forms, time that would have been spent in discussion and peer collaboration. Instead of thinking of 'cutting down' syllabi, one might 'cut up' syllabi and piece back together the elements that are critical for meeting learning outcomes. In other words, at a course-design level, it may be that four case studies work as well as five, or that 2.5 weeks for each novel rather than two will allow for highest-level critical thinking, or that removing one text or chapter from the course as a whole will allow creative rethinking of how remaining course elements fit together. Consider using one of the available [tools to calculate time typically required for specific course elements](#).

Course design

Questions to ask in course design

1. What are the course learning outcomes, and how can they be achieved in an online context?
2. How many hours do students need to spend on my one course? Is this workload reasonable given the extra demands of online learning and students' other courses? And how am I imagining that students spend their working time in the average week in the course?

3. What elements of my course can be effectively delivered asynchronously, through recorded media or learning materials? Which ones should be synchronous, such as peer-to-peer work or work that requires immediate feedback?
4. What patterns and schedules can I establish so that students clearly understand, in advance, what they are expected to do each week? What instructions do I need to provide to students so they know how to successfully engage in planned activities in the online learning spaces/tools I am using?
5. How will students prepare for class with reading or other work in order to meet learning outcomes? Do I need to plan for extra time for students' preparation in the online environment? Can my assigned materials be obtained either digitally or through relatively simple hard copy purchase? Are innovative approaches or restructuring needed to support student preparation?
6. If students require foundational skills and/or knowledge provided by previous courses in order to succeed in your course, recognize that many students' learning experiences have recently been affected by disruptions associated with COVID-19. Consider ways you can help students assess their familiarity with concepts that form the foundation upon which your course builds (e.g., through a self-assessment quiz in Canvas) and formalizing time devoted to grounding work to affirm the foundation you may normally assume is in place and guide students who need to catch up.

Examples of how instructional time could be reimagined

There are many ways that instructional time could be split for students in average class weeks. Rigor is located in learning outcomes, not in quantity of activity: in online contexts, course work can often be streamlined for focus on learning outcomes.

The following examples offer suggestions of how one might structure a week in an online version of a discussion/lecture course of 30–60 students. These samples assume the standard three hours per week of classroom time in the face-to-face model; a full-time load assumes that students take five courses at a time. Resources such as the [Arts Remote Teaching Template](#) in Canvas (usable beyond Arts) can help provide a useful supporting structure for any of these approaches.

Example A: First- or second-year introductory course

Each week students would be responsible for:

- Watching asynchronous instructional material, which would include a mix of short lectures (max. 15 minutes each) and videos: total = 90 minutes
- Completing an online activity using the week's material: total = 45 minutes
- Attending synchronous discussion section. Students should complete the readings and asynchronous work in advance of this discussion: total = 45 minutes
- Preparation and reading: total = 2 hours

- Preparing for assessments: avg 1–2 hours a week divided over term
- **Total time per week: 6–7 hours/week**

Example B: Senior lecture/discussion course

Each week students would be responsible for:

- Watching asynchronous instructional material: 4 x 15 minutes
- Attending synchronous discussion class: 60–75 minutes
- Completing asynchronous discussion/peer feedback/group collaboration: 30–45 mins
- Preparation and reading: 3 hours
- Preparing assessed assignments: avg 2 hours a week divided over term
- **Total time: ~8 hours/week**

Instructional strategies for discussion/lecture courses

Questions to ask in rethinking instructional approaches in online courses

1. What is the best use of synchronous time, and what strategies can I use to make it the most useful, inclusive, and accessible?
2. What technology will best support students in achieving the course learning outcomes? Will I need breakout groups, peer collaborative documents, a peer feedback tool or other tools? What support or instruction will students need in using this technology?
3. How should I structure asynchronous time? For example, can I use recording over slides or do I have more complex needs? Asynchronous does not have to mean passive consumption, so how can I design asynchronous time to encourage student interaction with content or with one another?
4. What can I do to foster a sense of community or cohort among the students to facilitate engagement and a human, collaborative learning environment that echoes the tone of my in-classroom teaching?

Examples of instructional strategies for engagement, collaboration and active learning

Online learning can be designed to foreground human connection and collaboration that achieve the outcomes and impact of face-to-face discussion/lecture classes. We recommend that course *design* create structural predictability, but instructional *strategies* be varied (using the same basic tech toolkit), to help maintain engagement across the course.

Peer-to-peer engagement beyond the breakout groups tool

1. **Synchronous in-class designated respondents:** To allow discussion without either chaos or too many breakout groups that only some of the class can hear, assign a lead group of 4 to 5 designated respondents (DRs) for each class, with a schedule created at the start of term. Have DRs keep their cameras on, and ask them to be prepared to respond to questions for that class. Perhaps designate one to monitor the chat if you use it, and raise any questions that come up live as class goes on. Other students can still participate in discussion, but DRs reduce dead air, get discussion started, and give students a sense of having classmates present.
2. **Asynchronous class bloggers:** Assigning class bloggers (CBs) creates a public writing component (like a blog or paper 'published' on Canvas) and fosters genuine engagement with peers' work, making someone other than the instructor be the audience. Each CB is assigned a discussion board question in the course (5 to 8 posts) and writes a summary of other students' postings that also extends the discussion (an additional example, connection, etc.). They do this once or twice a semester. It creates more reading for these students, but they don't have to come up with their own original topic/content, which they like as a bit of a break. An alternate version would be designated note-takers for a class.
3. **Asynchronous sharing of work to arrive at a larger goal:** Students share work/collected data such that they can give feedback to each other and iterate to improve. In a physics course, for example, students share the final results of their lab in a Piazza post. Because there are a lot of ways to do the lab, their results all look a little different. This sequence of labs is about how we compare measurements and how we compare our results. The hidden aspect of this lab (in which they use a very realistic simulation of a pendulum) is that in their measurement they actually discover a breakdown in one of the approximations we use to derive a formula in the course. They are trying to figure out why their experimental result is giving the 'wrong answer', when actually they have measured the real thing, and it is the formula that is wrong. This is a scientific discussion of discovery in action through online learning on Piazza.
4. **Asynchronous Canvas-based peer review:** Students submit their own assignment/analysis/answer by a deadline, and are then paired up with one or two peers for peer review ([Canvas can do this automatically](#)). They read others' works and offer meaningful feedback to each other. Peer review can also be an assessment technique. See [the Peer Assessment Training Workshop site](#) for more ideas and resources.
5. **App-based online peer review:** Especially in first year, social anxiety can be a major factor in collaborative work (fear of being criticized, fear of alienating classmates by saying something is not perfect, fear of publicly showing a misunderstanding of course material). Tools like [ComPAIR](#) help them to develop peer feedback skills and vocabulary in an anonymized (but not anonymous) collaborative, asynchronous environment. Then later they are ready to do face-to-face (even if digital) feedback if applicable. Students answer a question, then are given pairs of peer answers to rank (i.e., simply identify which is better) and to offer feedback on. Assessing both the answer given and the feedback they give to others at equal weight leads to really thoughtful feedback for the most part.

Creating community for engaged learning

Quick moves:

1. **Have your class introduce themselves:** Post an introduction of yourself for students to model ([see example screenshot](#)), and make this part of the orientation/getting started assignment. Students find that they share programs or classes or interests, and study groups or sub-communities have ways to form. Be sure to give a word limit, or time frame for video introductions.
2. **Assign students into pairs to make a meme** that captures some aspect of the class (e.g., lecture, readings) — a concept, issue, lightbulb moment. Post to a Canvas thread and allow voting. These are, on the whole, brilliant and hilarious. Alternately, ask students to choose an image (instead of making a meme) that captures a concept or issue they found meaningful in a class, and post it with an explanation. Less hilarity, but often really insightful/thoughtful connections.

Cross-course community builders:

1. **Assign students to a term-long small group at the start of term**, to work with on a selection of tasks across the term: discussions on course materials, collaborative documents, presentations, co-authored written assignments, etc. Assignments can be low- or high-stakes. Managing their own asynchronous virtual meetings can be easier once they know each other, and there is time to build collaborative relationships. Groups can operate autonomously, or can have instructor/TA facilitation. Such facilitation does not necessarily increase instructor workload if one is reading and grading online discussion anyway (instead of replying to every single post, make interventions to facilitate interactions among students themselves).
2. **Create an asynchronous fan/geek forum** that is optional and ungraded, based on THEIR interests that are (even tangentially) related to the course. The instructor doesn't have to be involved at all, after general guidelines on appropriate engagement. But this can be a way to connect students and for instructors to see teachable connections we might not otherwise see. Examples: if teaching a Japanese film about a ramen shop owner, a "favourite ramen shop in Vancouver" thread; if teaching psychology, a "best tv representation of ..." thread; in history, "worst ever historical film on ..." Students enjoy it and build connections.
3. **'Director's circle':** Asynchronous and more formal than the forum above. Have small groups negotiate their ideal 'cast' of a film version of the play/novel/historical moment the class is studying (and then post their cast to the class at the end of the week, possibly for synchronous debate). The discussion is engaging, and having to come to agreement requires analysis of the text. To take it further, one could assign an individual low-stakes two-pager on the particular textual rationale for their casting, for any two texts across the course (5% each) so that students feel a concrete 'benefit' from the discussions. No busywork! Similar strategies would work for finding a popular culture case that exemplifies an economic theory, a scientific phenomenon, a psychological theory, etc.
4. Use a **repeating discussion activity** through the course for students to share reflections or responses to key readings in a week or module. One approach used in the Faculty of Education is to have students identify a word or phrase that they find significant from across the week's readings, and to post a short reflection where they consider the keyword's significance in relation to their own experience/conceptions, or to topics emerging in the course. This can be a relatively light structure that provides peers an opportunity to

gain some different perspectives drawn from a shared set of readings/viewings, but it also provides an easy space for peer comments/responses that can lead to student-driven exploration of ideas.

Assessment

It may be possible to maintain the assessment structure of your face-to-face course if your discipline tends to individual projects like essays or at-home research assignments that do not require collaboration, but for others, assessment may need to change in a significant way. Academic integrity is a significant topic of discussion in online learning (though some [research](#) suggests that misconduct is not actually any more frequent in online than in face-to-face instruction), but assignment and exam design can go a long way to mitigate risk and reduce opportunities. Assessing class contribution/participation without creating busywork for students and excess marking for faculty is another central area for reflection.

This section offers specific strategies on affirming academic integrity, and then focuses on examples of innovative assessment strategies that are specifically applicable to small to midsize discussion/lecture courses. For a much larger consideration of assessment, including large-scale group projects, final exams and quiz-based assessment, see the [Reimagining Assessments on the UBC Wiki](#).

Questions to ask when rethinking assessment

1. How can I build academic integrity into the design and expectations of assessment, beyond tools such as Turnitin, Lockdown Browser and Proctorio?
2. Can I do anything to simplify/serialize/streamline assessments in my course without impacting students' ability to achieve learning outcomes?
3. Can my existing assessment structure be adjusted to increase flexibility but stay otherwise basically the same? Consider adding in some scaffolding or choose-two-of-three assignment structure to create flexibility for students. Consider relaxing time constraints to provide students with a bit more time to help mitigate potential technical problems they may be facing.
4. If I normally assign a large-scale group project, do I still want to include this assessment in my online class? If not, what could replace it? If so, which tools will let me do a version of that? How will I manage cases where students simply disappear?
5. Is a final exam necessary for my learning objectives? Are there alternate assessments that can be used to assess final student learning? Can it be "take home" or will it need to be invigilated in some way?
6. For midterms/exams, could [two-stage tests](#) or group exams work?
7. Do I want to assess class contribution (participation)? And if so, how can I do that? Am I assessing preparation, contributions to group learning or something else? Given that some students may be unable to attend synchronous sessions, can I shift from assigning grades for attendance and explicitly outline what 'contribution/participation' means in the course, and how students will be assessed?

8. How can I assess class contribution or knowledge or break down larger assessments into smaller units *without creating busywork for students and endless marking for myself?*
9. What can I do to create peer idea sharing and engage them in authentic problem solving? Things like “You must post 10 times to the Discussion Board” do not tend to generate insight and depth, so what opportunities are there for students to create meaningful work and share it with each other for feedback and reflection?

Confirming academic integrity beyond Proctorio and Turnitin

Following on the general principles around academic integrity discussed in the Guiding Principles above, here are several specific strategies already in use across UBC

Examples of strategies for assessments designed to encourage academic integrity

1. **Require assignment ‘wrappers’/reflections:** following submission of a take-home assignment, have students submit a short reflection or questionnaire in which they explain or reflect on their thinking or process used in completing the assignment. E.g., “what was the most important point your analysis made, and why?” or “what was one thing you did while completing this assignment that worked well, and that you’ll do again, and what is one thing you will do differently?” or “how did you choose your methodology, and what did you better understand by applying it in this assignment” or “in what specific ways did you use feedback on earlier assignments in creating this one?”

To improve the chances the student themselves submits the reflection:

- randomly assign different questions to different students in the course;
- require submission within a short time frame of the original assignment submission (indicate in the assignment instructions that a question will be asked so that they can plan, and think about time zones);
- allow a short period for response (the Canvas quiz function lets you assign a designated answering period after the student opens the question).

These reflections foster meta-cognition for all students, and can also be helpful in discussions with students when you think there might be a misconduct situation. Alternatively (and depending on class size), have students do this reflection in short 1:1 meetings, without specific questions in advance.

2. **Make assignments very course-specific,** with strategies like:

- requiring comparison of two texts from the course readings or the application of a particular concept or methodology discussed in this course;
- asking for response to, or extension of, discussions or activities done in class;
- building or designing something (a website, a wiki, a model) in which they apply the specific learning of the course.

As disciplinarily appropriate, options that allow connections to students’ own experiences in relation to the course, such as auto-ethnographic methodologies, are more difficult to farm out (and increase buy-in, see #3).

3. **Allow choice in assignment topic and including required proposal or 'pitch':** students have more investment in work they tailor to their own interests, and therefore are less likely to use something 'canned', though it is ideal to require that the individual topic relates in some very specific/clear way to the particular course. Including a required proposal (even if only for feedback) 'scaffolds' the assignments and provides comparison of proposed and finished topics. Alternatively, require students to 'pitch' or propose paper topics in short 1:1 appointments.
4. **Incorporate peer-to-peer feedback requirements:** peer-review (e.g., through Canvas) with academic integrity as an explicit component of the feedback rubric, helps students by helping them avoid doing the assignment last-minute and by reminding them to check that work is being done ethically.
5. **Include explicit evaluation criteria (in assignment instructions, rubrics, etc.) about academic integrity:** Consider something like "This assignment meets the expectation of ethical knowledge production, through its citation, etc." Provide course time/space for explanations on and questions about how to do the required work of the particular assignment with integrity. (Don't expect that they all know, particularly if it's not a typical assignment for your discipline.)
6. **Individual or group oral quizzes, presentations, projects:**
 - Group quizzes: 1 group, 15 mins, each person answers a question, can have time before to prep (like a 2-stage quiz).
 - Round-tables, presentations, projects: Have groups discuss at the outset what 'academic integrity' means or how it will be upheld in collaborative contexts.
 - Oral exams: short, open-ended, with focus on 'how they know' instead of 'what they know', ideally with as much variety as possible in questions so that it will not be useful or possible to share questions in advance.
 - Circulating in advance a long list of potential essay questions. If an ambitious student prepares all 20, they will definitely have met the learning outcomes!

Examples of assessment strategies that encourage flexibility and connection

1. **'Discussion day' (DD) assignment** enables meaningful collaborative learning plus flexibility. Three times in term, divide students into groups for a full hour of discussion of (any of all of) a list of 6–8 specific topics. Following ONE of those days, they will submit an essay, but they choose which one (topics are different for each DD option, so one can't just procrastinate an essay from DD 1 for DD 3 deadline). The second element is that, to encourage early attempts, every DD topic is also an eligible term paper topic, so if a student attempts DD 2 but is not happy with the product, they can choose to use that as the first draft of their term paper instead (so the work does not feel 'wasted').

This approach avoids peer-editing nitpickery and focuses on ideas and high-level discussion that feeds into essays, but is not about essays.

2. **Big Picture Questions:** The whole class works together to solve a large problem or tackle a general theme over the course of a few weeks. Aspects of the assignment have student interaction and requirements to get grades. Participation can be graded on quality and rubrics can be designed that encourage quality discussion. After the

class 'solves the problem', have everyone write their individual synthesis of the solution and use [ComPAIR](#) to have students' learn from each other's work.

3. **Collaborative blog/wiki activities:** Get students to collaborate on knowledge creation in a way that is assessable and visible to students in the course, but which can also lead to a form of publication that emerges from the work of the cohort, and which can become part of a more public work if it is shared beyond the learning management system. Students are often quite motivated to build out such a resource as they have a strong sense of ownership and agency over the final production. Students can play roles of authors/editors and commenters in such spaces. (See examples from [GEOG352](#) and [LAST100](#).)
4. The **photo essay** is a particularly strong assignment for an online class, insofar as the piece has to speak for itself. While the student/group turns in a short summary/explanation of their assignment to the instructor, their peers only see the finished product, which has to demonstrate a clear point of view and build an argument using visuals, formatting, and short captions. Final format is tech-flexible: whatever format they think best suits the content (Instagram, WordPress, Adobe Spark, Twitter, etc.) After the projects are posted online, the other students in the class assess the work using a simple rubric. I compile the feedback and return it, after student names have been removed, with my commentary and a grade.

Strategies for quizzes and exams

Strategies for quizzes and exams are outlined in detail on the [Reimagining Assessments](#) page on the UBC Wiki and won't be repeated here, but for discussion/lecture classes, there are questions that can help one to decide on what we want quizzes or an arc of quizzes or tests to do:

1. Do I mostly want students to learn material week by week, or make connections between weekly materials?
 - If the focus is on learning material week-to-week, consider shorter assessments at the end of each week or chapter.
 - If the focus is on making connections between weeks of material, consider making assessments that are at the end of a section (perhaps 3–4 weeks of class).
2. Are quiz/test assessments intended to gauge knowledge and are a core assessment tool or are they intended to make sure students are keeping up with material and are not core assessment tools?
 - If quizzes/tests are intended to gauge knowledge and you are using quizzes/tests as a core assessment tool, consider having them be graded, make up a larger portion of the overall course grade, and be taken at the end of a section or unit.
 - If quizzes/tests are intended to make sure that students are on track and keeping up with the material and are not a core assessment tool, consider making them worth fewer points, allowing students to retake them until they pass, and requiring students to complete them before class sessions.
 - To keep marking manageable, if questions are short-answer or narrative, consider creating a coarse grade scale of 0–4
3. Can the Canvas Quiz tool (plus or minus the Lockdown Browser) support the kind of quiz/test I want? See more on the [Canvas quizzes page by UBCO Centre for Teaching and Learning](#).

Assessing class contribution/participation in online teaching

Finally, it is class contribution (participation) that for many students is the hallmark of small discussion/lecture courses. Using straightforward ‘attendance’ is complex online and potentially unfair for students with time zone issues. Including several very small activities (see examples below) requires little marking time, but ensures that students are not overly stressed about any single activity.

Here are some ways to assess contributions to the class learning environment without creating busywork for students or excess work for faculty:

1. Do a short reading/preparation quiz at the start of one class a week, and [set Canvas to auto-grade](#).
2. Require an online version of a classroom ‘exit ticket’ system: give them five minutes of ‘class time’ at the end of a synchronous session and ask them to submit one question that they have or one idea they would like to hear more about. The same can be done for certain recorded content, where students submit a 50-word note (or image or calculation) in response to a question that appears part way through the slides. These can be assessed quickly on a coarse grade 1–3 system (weak, good, excellent).
3. Document student participation during synchronous sessions (including their turns in roles like Designated Respondent or Class Blogger), but also create an option for asynchronous contribution for those who are unable to attend synchronous sessions. This can be done by creating weekly open discussion pages on Canvas. Not only does it enable students living in different time zones to contribute to class discussions, but it also allows anybody to continue engaged in conversation following the synchronous discussion.
4. For synchronous or asynchronous group annotation or text markup exercises (like [CLAS](#)), require a note listing all participants, and maybe letter-grade peer evaluations of contribution.
5. For larger projects, invite peer review of preparation and contribution, submitted privately with just a letter grade. Brief confidential peer evaluations (including self-assessment) of longer small-group discussions are similarly valuable and only take a few minutes for instructors to collate.
6. At the end of a week or unit, set up a ‘self-reflection’ as a quiz (“what I understood easily”, “what was challenging”, “what I could have done to be more effective”, “if I could change one thing about this unit it would be”, etc.). This sort of reflection is very fast to assess (1–3 on effort/insight) but guides students to think about their responsibility for their learning. It also can signal students who are in trouble and may need support or [early alert](#).

General resources on online teaching and learning:

- Using the Blended Learning model to think about course design and teaching: [Blended Online Learning — research and resources \(Google doc\)](#)
- Vaughan N., Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison, R. (2013). [Teaching in Blended Learning Environments \(PDF\)](#). (Though focussed on blended teaching, there are some good chapters outlining concepts/approaches that speak to synchronous/asynchronous aspects of learning, strategies for adapting courses beyond the physical classroom, and strategies for design and assessment).
- Using digital humanities in online teaching: [Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities: Concepts, Models, and Experiments](#). Includes resources/activities that can be easily reused.
- [The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education \(PDF\)](#)