



Best Practices for Exemplary Online Instruction

This document is based upon the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education"¹ by Chickering, A. and Gamson, Z. In addition, portions of this document have been adapted from the Quality Online Course Initiative (QOCI) instrument, developed by members and staff at the Illinois Online Network, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL. [See more information about Chickering and Gamson's research](#) (you may have to scroll to the last page if this link does not take you to page 14 in this document).

Questions about the *Black Hawk College Best Practices for Exemplary Online Instruction* guide may be directed to the TLC Advisory Committee of the Faculty Senate or the Teaching/Learning Center at Black Hawk College. tlc@bhc.edu

Purpose of this Guide

The items in "Best Practices for Exemplary Online Instruction" emphasize potential effective practices associated with teaching online, not a minimum set of standards or competencies and are not to be used for faculty tenure and promotion review, or retention by the administration. They represent those teaching practices that appear in the best practices literature, including a variety of similar guides or standards developed by other colleges or resource centers devoted to online instruction. The guide can be used as:

- 1) a source of specific suggestions for new online faculty as they design their courses
- 2) a collaborative peer review tool that encourages dialogue among online faculty
- 3) a framework for new online faculty training and support, as provided by the Teaching/Learning Center or other support staff

Introduction

The best practices are organized using Chickering and Gamson's research on the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. They provide you with specific ideas for what each principle might look like in an online course.

PRINCIPLES FOR GOOD PRACTICE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

PRINCIPLE 1: GOOD PRACTICE ENCOURAGES STUDENT-FACULTY CONTACT

- A. Establish policies describing the types of communication preferred and their corresponding channel.
- B. Set clear standards for instructor response time.
- C. Encourage students contacting you with a time-sensitive issue to do so in the manner specified in your syllabus.
- D. Utilize office hours.
- E. Provide an instructor e-mail address on the course homepage.
- F. Provide prompt, constructive feedback on assignments.

¹ AAHE Bulletin, 39, 3-7 Chickering, A. and Gamson, Z. (1987).

- G. Develop varied opportunities for student-student, student-instructor, and student-content interaction.
- H. Ensure a sense of community.
- I. Proactively engage students in all aspects of the course.
- J. Facilitate learning how to be a successful online learner.
- K. Solicit student feedback on the course and their learning; share composite results.

PRINCIPLE 2: GOOD PRACTICE DEVELOPS RECIPROCITY AND COOPERATION AMONG STUDENTS

- A. Build a warm and inviting atmosphere.
- B. Establish a question and answer forum in the online discussion board.
- C. Outline expectations for student-student interaction.
- D. Scaffold small group work on course projects or activities.
- E. Incorporate peer review and/or peer mentoring.
- F. Invite students to share ideas, resources, etc. in their postings.

PRINCIPLE 3: GOOD PRACTICE ENCOURAGES ACTIVE LEARNING

- A. Anchor instruction with authentic tasks.
- B. Combine the power of technology and active online activities.
- C. Employ activities that develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- D. Encourage a variety of opportunities for student collaboration.

PRINCIPLE 4: GOOD PRACTICE GIVES PROMPT FEEDBACK

- A. Provide clear, specific instructions about what is expected.
- B. Provide opportunities for self-assessments and reflection.
- C. Utilize coaching strategies to provide early feedback.
- D. Enlist multiple opportunities to provide student feedback.
- E. Provide feedback on graded assignments.
- F. Provide access to an online grade book.
- G. Provide prompt turn-around to student questions.
- H. Handle non-course-related feedback through advising or referrals.

PRINCIPLE 5: GOOD PRACTICE EMPHASIZES TIME ON TASK

- A. Ensure that course assignments reflect the priorities specified in the course's learning outcomes.
- B. Maintain a calendar with specific submission instructions for assignments.
- C. Utilize progressive deadlines for larger assignments.

- D. Provide sample assignments.
- E. Provide resources and guidance for completion of assignments.
- F. Organize all resources associated with an assignment.
- G. Judge appropriateness and adequacy of materials and technology for audience.
- H. Include well written instructions and FAQs for technology used in the course.
- I. Refer technical or academic problems to appropriate sources.
- J. Design feedback tools to allow learners to progress.

PRINCIPLE 6: GOOD PRACTICE COMMUNICATES HIGH EXPECTATIONS

- A. Emphasize high expectations on the syllabus.
- B. Utilize course orientation, if appropriate, to communicate expectations.
- C. Provide some higher-order thinking skill elements to the assignment instructions.
- D. Communicate connections between each course outcome, assignment or major activity, and a meaningful external reference point.
- E. Establish clear expectations for each module/unit.
- F. Provide links to basic help on skills required for assignments.
- G. Design assignments such that the probability of cheating is reduced.
- H. Establish a firm policy about deadlines and late assignments.
- I. Provide easy opportunities for students to seek help from the instructor and other sources.

PRINCIPLE 7: GOOD PRACTICE RESPECTS DIVERSE TALENTS AND WAYS OF LEARNING

- A. Apply knowledge of learner characteristics to course design.
- B. Communicate willingness to accommodate various accessibility needs.
- C. Provide varied resources, assignment options, and learning modality choices.
- D. Offer assistance in helping students make choices based on their self-assessments and career goals.
- E. Maximize opportunities for students to understand and learn from their differences.
- F. Provide multiple and varied sources of help.

PRINCIPLE 8: GOOD PRACTICE IN ONLINE LEARNING EMPLOYS AN EFFECTIVE COURSE SITE DESIGN TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING

- A. Utilize instructional design to help students with course content.
- B. Utilize site design to encourage communication, interaction and collaboration.
- C. Explain [student evaluation](#) and assessment policies.
- D. Provide learner support and resources.
- E. Utilize web design principles.

PRINCIPLE 1: GOOD PRACTICE ENCOURAGES STUDENT-FACULTY CONTACT.

"Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Establish policies describing the **types of communication** and their corresponding channel. Ex: "Post requests for help in the '911' folder on the discussion board." "Post questions about assignments in the 'Q&A' folder of the discussion board." "The quickest way to get through to me is via email."
- B. Set clear standards for **instructors' response time** to email, voicemail, or assignments. Ex: "I will respond to email within two days of receiving it." "Assignment feedback will be posted to the appropriate area of our course site, usually within a week of the due date."
- C. Encourage students with a time sensitive issue to contact you in the manner you have specified in your syllabus for a request deemed urgent.
- D. Utilize **office hours** (e.g., chat, IM) to stay in touch with online students.
- E. Provide an **instructor e-mail** address on the course homepage with other links to college resources, such as the library, other faculty, tutoring, Help Desk, etc.
- F. Provide prompt, constructive **feedback on assignments**.
- G. Develop varied opportunities for student-student, student-instructor, and student-content **interaction**.
- H. Ensure a sense of community (e.g., create a **safe environment**, specify **netiquette standards**, post a **self-introduction**, be friendly and **approachable**, **contribute regularly to the online discussion**, without doing so too much, so that the students wait for you to speak, **acknowledge learner contributions** via showing interest and encouragement, **model appreciation of diverse perspectives**, **track individual participation** and draw non-participating students into the discussions).
- I. **Proactively engage students** in all aspects of the course, especially seeking out those who appear to be absent or non-participative.
- J. Facilitate learning **how to be a successful online learner** (i.e. online or face-to-face orientation, ongoing feedback and guidance about successful online learning behaviors, technical how-to's, etc.).
- K. **Solicit student feedback** throughout the course on how the course is going, how their learning is going, etc. Then share composite results with the students, enlisting their assistance in making adjustments to the course. Keep in mind Principle #6 rather than trying to determine one best response.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 2: GOOD PRACTICE DEVELOPS RECIPROCITY AND COOPERATION AMONG STUDENTS.

"Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Build a warm and inviting atmosphere among the online learning community of students through modeling, facilitating community-building activities (e.g., introductions/pictures, ice breakers) and monitoring student interactions. (see Principle #1 for more detail)
- B. Establish a chat or similar forum (for informal conversation) and a course Q&A forum (where students can ask and answer questions of each other regarding course matters) in the discussion board.
- C. Outline expectations for student-student interaction in the syllabus or assignment specifications (e.g., responsibilities and instructions, do's and don'ts, grading/weighting attributed to whole-class or small group interaction, rationale tied to course outcomes).
- D. Scaffold small group work on course projects or activities, i.e., **establish a process** for forming groups and assigning roles, **provide tips and resources** to assist with group tasks, create **private work areas** for collaboration and sharing of files/discussion/chat within the course site, **monitor group functioning** and provide early feedback to help groups function better, **assess group functioning** as part of collaborative assignments.
- E. Incorporate **peer review and/or peer mentoring** as part of any creative assignment, especially if it has multiple deliverables; e.g., writing, creative projects.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 3: GOOD PRACTICE ENCOURAGES ACTIVE LEARNING.

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Anchor instruction with **authentic tasks** situated in real-world contexts. Create activities relevant to learners that allow them to attach personal meaning to content. Ex: use simulations/case studies that apply to real-world issues.
- B. Combine the power of technology and active online activities to enhance student learning (**addressing multiple learning styles**) Ex: (1) video clips of interviews, famous speeches, etc. followed by an active discussion on the discussion board; (2) flash simulations of course content followed by small group projects to invent solutions; (3) screen animations followed by an online quiz or practice session with automated feedback.
- C. Employ activities that develop **critical thinking and problem-solving** skills connected to the course outcomes, such as case studies, collaborative exercises, portfolios, compare and contrast activities, etc.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 4: GOOD PRACTICE GIVES PROMPT FEEDBACK.

"Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. When getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence. In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves."
(Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Provide clear, specific **instructions** for course requirements, processes, and expectations via the syllabus and assignment instructions.
- B. Provide opportunities for **self-assessments** in the form of ungraded pre-assessments (e.g., What do you know? Where should you start learning new info? How does your current competence relate to the course outcomes?), ungraded practice quizzes or assignments, or self-reflection about learning progress and personal goals to improve.
- C. Utilize **coaching strategies** and provide early insights into strengths, areas needing improvement (and why) on larger assignments - prior to final submission to be graded.
- D. Enlist **multiple opportunities for feedback**. Ex: automated during online practice activities, peer review, posting of "exemplary answers" to essay questions on tests, rubrics to individuals, tests/quiz scores, self-assessments, informal "catch them being good" comments.
- E. Provide timely **feedback on graded assignments** to multiple facets of the assignment, weighting the facets as communicated to students up front.
- F. Provide access to an **online grade book** at all times.
- G. Provide prompt **answers to student questions** via email, voice mail, Q&A Forum in the discussion board, etc. Set up automated acknowledgments that assignments have been received.
- H. Handle **non-course-related feedback** by providing individual advising, offering referrals and links to qualified college resources and offices (e.g., career center, advising, tutoring).

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 5: GOOD PRACTICE EMPHASIZES TIME ON TASK.

"Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis of high performance for all." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Ensure that **course assignments** and expected time spent on them reflect the priorities specified in the course's learning outcomes.
- B. Maintain a **calendar** or assignment listing with definitive deadlines and specific instructions for submitting each one.
- C. Utilize **progressive deadlines** for various stages of larger projects or assignments.
- D. Provide **samples** of well-done assignments or ones with common problems or errors highlighted to illustrate the instructor's expectations.
- E. Provide **resources and guidance** for completion of assignments, such as detailed tips, instructions, templates, rubrics (grading criteria), and other relevant resources.
- F. **Organize all resources** associated with an assignment in one place on the course web site for faster downloading and reduced confusion.
- G. Judge **appropriateness and adequacy** of materials and technology used in the course **for a given audience** and make materials and technology adjustments due to shifting audience needs and abilities.
- H. Make sure **instructions and FAQs** for technology used in the course are well-written and easy to find on the web site.
- I. **Refer** technical or academic problems that you cannot handle to appropriate sources **and follow up** to ensure resolution.
- J. Design **feedback tools** such that individualized feedback on student work can be prompt and specific enough to allow learners to progress. See Principle #2 for more information.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 6: GOOD PRACTICE COMMUNICATES HIGH EXPECTATIONS.

"Expect more and you will get more. High expectations are important for everyone—for the poorly prepared for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations for themselves and make extra efforts." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. **Syllabus emphasizes high expectations**, but not ones that are unreasonable or overwhelming relative to the prerequisite skills most students bring to the class.
- B. Utilize **course orientation, if appropriate**, to communicate high expectations and express confidence in the students' abilities to reach them with your support.
- C. For each major assignment or course activity, **provide** some higher-order thinking skill elements to the assignment's instructions.
- D. **Communicate connections** between each course outcome, assignment or major activity, and an external standard in the field (if available) or meaningful external reference point. Ex: certification standards, famous leader in the field's statements, award criteria.
- E. **Design assessment methods** such that the probability of **cheating is reduced**.
- F. **Establish a firm policy about deadlines** and late assignments that provides some flexibility or negotiability for adult learners. Ex: due date to get feedback, due date with no feedback, due date when late points start accumulating, due date beyond which late assignments are not accepted at all.
- G. **Provide easy opportunities for students to seek help** from the instructor, from each other, from outside people or web-based resources.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 7: GOOD PRACTICE RESPECTS DIVERSE TALENTS AND WAYS OF LEARNING.

"There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learn in new ways that do not come so easily." (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for what this principle might look like in an online course.

- A. Apply knowledge of **learner characteristics** to course design; e.g., learning styles, levels and types of prior knowledge, adult learning principles, cultural backgrounds or influences, motivations for learning, gender, age (generational patterns), life experiences, socioeconomic class (impact of poverty on expectations about college, etc.).
- B. Communicate willingness to accommodate various **accessibility needs** and how to request special services. Research available options at BHC through the TLC.
- C. Offer **assistance in navigating above course options and helping students make choices** or negotiated adaptations of course work based on their self-assessments, career goals, and/or other pertinent characteristics.
- D. Maximize opportunities for students to **understand and learn from their differences**, particularly when they directly impact course outcomes.
- E. Provide multiple and varied **sources of help**, including online tutoring, FAQs, etc. and optional face-to-face tutorial sessions, hands-on supervised labs, or peer mentoring.

Other ideas:

PRINCIPLE 8: GOOD PRACTICE IN ONLINE LEARNING EMPLOYS AN EFFECTIVE COURSE SITE DESIGN TO SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING.

This portion of the guide represents those portions of the QOCI (Quality Online Course Initiative) specific to an online course site design or, in a few cases, some elements not addressed by the seven (7) principles.

The following best practices from the literature on online teaching and learning may provide you with specific ideas for the design of your course site.

A. Utilize instructional design to help students with course content.

- a. **Content is sequenced** and structured in a manner that enables learners to achieve the stated goals.
- b. A **course description** is provided.
- c. **Instructor information** is available to student with contact, biographical, availability information, and picture.
- d. Students are provided with a list of supplies such as textbooks and other **instructional materials** needed for the course.
- e. A clear concise **list of modules and activities** that will be completed within each of the course modules/chapters/topics is provided.
- f. **Grading policy** is provided including grading scale and weights.
- g. **Calendar** of due dates and other events is provided.
- h. **Technical competencies** necessary for course completion is provided.
- i. A list of **technical requirements** such as connection speed, hardware, and software is provided.
- j. Course abides by **copyright and fair use** laws.
- k. A **Code of Conduct** including netiquette standards and academic integrity expectations is provided.
- l. **Audio and video files** have a specific purpose that does not distract from course goals and objectives.

Other ideas:

B. Utilize site design to encourage communication, interaction and collaboration.

- a. **Discussions** are organized in clearly defined forums and/or threads.
- b. **Access** is available to individuals and groups based upon discussion's purpose such as private conversations between student and instructor, group work, and class interactions.

Other ideas:

C. Explain student evaluation and assessment policies.

- a. **Assessment and evaluation** tools are appropriate for measuring stated outcomes.
- b. Assessments and evaluations are designed and administered to uphold **academic integrity**.
- c. Defined course procedures for reporting grade information complies with **FERPA** (Family Educational and Reporting Privacy Act) and institutional regulations on reporting grade information to students.
- d. A **grading scale** that defines letter grades and/or weights, if applicable, is provided.
- e. **Penalties** assessed to grades, if applicable, are provided.
- f. **Student participation** is defined and a mechanism for measuring quality and quantity is provided.
- g. The opportunity for earning **extra credit**, if applicable, is provided.
- h. Instructions for completion and **submission** are provided.

Other ideas:

D. Provide learner support and resources.

- a. Links to institutional/program information and/or **policies** and procedures are provided.
- b. Links to tutorials and other **Course Management System support** sites are provided (e.g., for Canvas, myBlackHawk Course Studio).
- c. Links, e-mail addresses, and/or phone numbers to **technical support** are provided.
- d. Statement of ADA (American Disabilities Act) Compliance and request for **special services** is provided.

Other ideas:

E. **Utilize web design principles.**

- a. **Scrolling** is minimized or facilitated with anchors.
- b. **Consistent layout design** orients users throughout the site.
- c. **Font** type, size, and color are readable and consistent throughout the site.
- d. Use of **pop-up windows** (windows with specific information, no scroll bars, and no menus) is appropriate.
- e. Windows open in appropriate **frames** that do not confuse users. The use of additional frames, other than those within the CMS is avoided.
- f. **Audio/video hardware requirements** do not extend beyond the basic sound cards, speakers, and video players unless appropriately needed to meet course goals and objectives.
- g. **Audio standards** meet minimum standards, such as good audio quality, appropriate length to meet learning goals, reasonable file size so that it does not restrict the ability of students to download the file when using lower bandwidth connections, and a transcript is provided when students with hearing impairments are in the class.
- h. **Video files** meet minimum standards, such as good video quality, appropriate length to meet learning goals, reasonable file size so that it does not restrict the ability of students to download the file when using lower bandwidth connections, and a transcript is provided when students with hearing impairments are in the class.
- i. Images are **clear**.
- j. Image files are **optimized** for efficient loading.
- k. Use of **animated GIFs** is **limited** to only those that contribute to the learning experience – supporting the course content.
- l. **Navigation** aids are located in the same location. Graphics used as links are **consistent**.
- m. **Navigation cues** are present, clearly identifiable, offered in text and graphic formats, and are obvious links based on visual cues such as color, underlining, and text directives (e.g., Start here).
- n. Course has no **broken links**.
- o. **Hyperlinks** open in appropriate windows or frames.
- p. **Course design** indicates a conscious effort to comply with or exceed Level 1 of Accessibility standards.

Other ideas:

Required to be in every online course:

- Complaint Procedures: <https://www.bhc.edu/student-resources/safety-and-campus-police/student-right-know/>
- Course Evaluation: <https://learn.bhc.edu/courses/1111009/> (click Course Evaluation link on page)
- Student Evaluation: <https://learn.bhc.edu/courses/734982/pages/tlc-toolbox-student-evaluation-instructions-for-canvas/>

Additional Resources

- Online Training Course for BHC online instructors: <https://learn.bhc.edu/courses/1111009>
- [Best Practice Strategies to Promote Academic Integrity in Online Education.](#)
- [Online Education Resources \(Illinois Online Network\)](#)
- [Black Hawk College Student Handbook](#)

Chickering and Gamson Background Information

Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, in collaboration with colleagues, the AAHE, and the Education Commission of the States (funded by the Johnson Foundation) completed a meta-analysis of 50 years of research on higher education teaching and learning. Their goal was to make this research more accessible to faculty members and institutions, so that the many large studies that had been completed during that time would have a larger impact on teaching and learning in higher education. Their famous article summarizing the findings appeared in 1987, followed by a book in 1991.

Inventories based on their study have been developed for faculty, institutional, and student research (1989-90). A Center for the Seven Principles was established at Winona State University. Numerous college support centers, state agencies and educational resource centers, such as the TLT Group within Educause, have used the seven principles as a basis for publishing faculty resource materials and conducting research surrounding their application to undergraduate teaching in other-than-face-to-face settings, as well.

The Winter, 1999 issue of the New Directions in Teaching and Learning series includes a chapter written by Chickering and Gamson, chronicling some of these applications and adaptations to date. The seven principles are used in this document as an organizing structure for the many items drawn from the best practices literature on online education.

Seven Principles or Eight?

Users of this guide may notice that there is a host of examples and suggestions under the headings of eight principles rather than seven. A word of explanation: Chickering and Gamson's principles reference general teaching principles, regardless of the delivery method used. Most online teaching resources speak separately about course site design and online teaching practices. Hence, there is an "8th principle" to speak to the many helpful best practice examples that have everything to do with the way an online course is organized and presented through the course site design, and little to do with the way the course is taught. It is hoped that the users of this guide find this distinction useful in interpreting the best practices for their own applications.