

Blackboard Learning System

The Pedagogy of Online Learning



Pedagogy is simply the art and science of learning. To ensure students are learning in an online course requires a certain set of skills, practices and behaviours. Yet many of the best practices used in a f2f (face-to-face) class are no different than those used in an online environment. It is important to remember that the teacher sets up the environment for learning and in an online context, the teacher is not really teaching, but facilitating the learning. In fact, web-based courses in Manitoba are designed to be teacher mediated. Even though web-based courses contain all the content and exercises necessary to cover the curriculum, they are not intended for independent study.

The role of the teacher in an online course can be summarized in 3 main areas. The teacher will:

1. **pace** the course
2. **assess** and evaluate student performance
3. **communicate** with students, administration, and parents

All this can be done through web-based technologies. Web-based technologies allow significant flexibility of time and place for teaching and learning. This mode of delivery is often known as asynchronous and is different than a f2f class.

- Web-based teachers can be anywhere as can students.
- Teachers and students no longer must be in the same building to engage in learning.
- Teachers can teach students across (and even beyond) their school divisions.
- Teaching and learning don't have to be confined by traditional school hours and schedules.

There are some strengths and challenges of web-based courses. The focus is always on the learning rather than the technology. Read the details below which will help overcome some of the challenges. You'll find a summary chart at the end.



Comparing a WBC with Face-to-Face Learning

There is a lot of literature comparing web-based teaching and learning to f2f. It is true that the medium is different, but the critical attributes of effective teachers remain the same. Web-based teachers must be subject matter experts, enthusiastic and responsive to students, care about students, well organized, and good communicators. **Good teaching f2f is good teaching online.** There are web-based analogues to most f2f methodologies teachers might want to use. The key is making the switch to the different medium. Some things are easier online and some things are more difficult compared to f2f teaching.

In terms of workload, one f2f section for one web-based section is a "fair trade" if the class size is about 20 students. In web-based teaching, the number of students is probably the most accurate measure of teacher workload as opposed to prep time or the number of subjects taught. The explanation lies in the way web-based course content is experienced by students. There is no stand up teaching and less

preparation by the teacher. However, more communication with individual students is required and handling of student work takes longer when submitted and graded electronically.

The literature also suggests that when comparing web-based student performance to f2f, there is no significant difference. This is interpreted as web-based learning being as good as f2f learning. Anecdotal data from web-based teachers supports this assertion. The qualification is always, "if students do the work" then they do as well as f2f students on exams and standards tests. Some teachers believe that students in web-based courses do more work than students in their f2f classes. The explanation is that because there is no seat time and less time wasted in web-based courses, students get more work done. **Students who want to learn, will learn, no matter if the environment is a f2f class or a WBC.**

Web-based course content can be thought of as a textbook from a publisher. WBC are customized for Manitoba curriculum and supported by web resources and communications tools whereas a textbook may follow some or most of the curricular outcomes. In both cases, teachers must make decisions about the content and its appropriateness for their students. Teachers must view the content as a resource and are expected to adjust as needed based upon current assessment practices and curricular changes.



Teaching and Class Management

In f2f teaching, student management is completely entwined with the role of teacher as a subject matter expert and mentor. The teacher is charged with the responsibility of "controlling" student behaviour as well as teaching the subject. In web-based teaching, subject matter expertise and management can easily be separated because students are at a distance and the perception is that they do not need to be managed, i.e. their behaviour must be fine. They do need to be managed but in a different way.

The main challenge in an online course is to **keep students on pace** to meet deadlines for completing work and doing assessments. Teachers must intervene to encourage underachieving students in web-based courses just as they would in their f2f practice. This practice of communicating or intervening should not be neglected and cannot be understated. Here lies the difference: a teacher in a f2f class intervenes by talking to the student; a teacher in a WBC intervenes by using email and possibly talking to the student by phone.



Online Learning Skills - How to Ensure Learning

If we list the attributes of students who do well in f2f classes, the list would include:

- reading at grade level
- good attendance

- engaged in class activity
- reasonably self-directed to complete work
- submits work
- meets deadlines
- prepares for tests

It turns out that this is exactly the optimal profile for students to succeed in web-based courses. Give students this list and modify it to suit your needs. **It should be clear to them what it takes to be successful in your course.**

So we know the profile of the successful student, but the real question is “what are we going to do to support students who do not have the attributes we want”? To put this question in perspective, remember that not all students in f2f classes do well or even pass. What does the system do for students who are not succeeding in f2f classes? The answer to that question also applies to web-based students. Web-based course students are present in one school in Manitoba. They will also have access to mentor-teachers, guidance, resource time, peer tutors, etc.



Student Scheduling

One of the most compelling aspects of web-based courses is the asynchronous nature of delivery. If the teacher and the class can access the course any time during their day, then it adds a lot of flexibility to student and teacher schedules. Research suggests that students who are given responsibility for their scheduling tend to become more self-directed learners. Of course, this approach requires students having access to computers and the Internet.

Benefits of asynchronous delivery/learning:

- increased flexibility in teacher and student schedules
- encourages students to become more self-directed learners
- improves the Internet experience for all users by distributing the load throughout the day



Local Support

Part of the whole picture for online learning and improving success rates includes the support systems in place at the school and divisional level. The community and parents must also be part of the plan and local implementation.

Web-based courses should be part of the information presented during student course registration, parent information meetings, and be included in student handbooks and websites.

School division administration need to consider to following details:

- staffing WBC teachers and how it will benefit schools in the division

- recruiting web-based teachers
- communication to inform all stakeholders, students, parents, teaching staff
- integrating web-based options into f2f classes; for example, start by integrating one module for one course at the Grade 9 level and use it in a controlled, teacher-directed environment
- supporting students, site facilitators, divisional technology coordinators and others involved
- provide student orientation to online learning
- supporting professional development for online teachers

Implementation plans will vary from one division to another. The list is only intended as suggestions. School divisions must make the decisions that are correct for the specific circumstances and local contexts.



Teacher Practices

→ Know the Course Content and Support System

Familiarize yourself with the course contents and know what your students will see and be asked to do. Make changes prior to students getting to content that you don't agree with.

If you have students who are off-site, establish contact with the site facilitator to determine how you will communicate with each other. Be sure that all necessary software had been installed in student workstations.

Find out what the options are for students who might experience difficulty. It is important to be proactive in dealing with students. One of the greatest challenges for students in web-based courses is to keep on task and get work completed. Proactive teachers are more successful in keeping students on pace.

→ Pace the Course

Pace the course by using Announcements, Calendar, selective release, and by enforcing deadlines. Students require their credit in a timely way. As the teacher, you plan to get students from point A to B in the time available. You also need to make sure your students are aware that WBC's are not intended for independent study.

Follow-up quickly with students who do not participate or who are tardy with assignments. Start with an email, and then use the phone if there is no reply. Notify your site facilitator whenever you talk to the student.

The nature of an online course creates some disconnect between the instructor and the parents of off-site students. Be aware of this and don't hesitate to contact parents to keep them informed. Depending on local policies and that of the receiving schools, communicating with parents should be done in collaboration with your site facilitator. Keep a list of parent names, phone numbers and email addresses.

Small problems can become big problems if unresolved. Always keep in touch with site facilitators to make sure that things are going well.

→ Communication is Key

Of all the factors that improves success rates and student learning, communication is at the top of the list. **Respond promptly to mail** from students. Encourage students to let you know when they will be “away” for a time so that you don’t have to “look” for them. Being away means away from an Internet connection and computer. Web-based courses are not limited to location in the same way as f2f classes.

Likewise, inform students if you will be unable to answer email or return assignments for a time. For example, if you’re away as a coach to a tournament, use the Announcements tool to post this information. Then students won’t worry why you are not responding the way you normally do.

Condition students to do things the way you want them to at the beginning of the course - this refers to discussion posts, mail, assignment submissions, etc. The web-based courses are designed to have initial exercises for students to practice using the communication tools and this is a good time to set the expectations.

As an example of conditioning for email communications, demonstrate proper etiquette and language usage. Will you allow for some spelling mistakes? Will you make the distinction between language used in chat rooms versus academic language, the language you will use and allow in emails? Most teachers find it acceptable to allow chat-type language in the Student Lounge and emails among themselves. Many teachers also find it acceptable to use a limited amount of text messaging acronyms, example, ttyl.

While most students have no problems navigating in WebCT, a few students might need help with saving files reliably (able to find them again) and attaching files to mail messages. Also posting to the correct discussion topic requires some help for some students.

Moderating discussion topics is important for the academic side of communications. Discussion topics are quite often used for assessments and are extremely valuable as an online tool to engage students in the learning. See "Moderating Topics" document found in a separate section.

→ Out of Sight is not Out of Mind

Teachers automatically call on a number of strategies in face-to-face teaching to “support” students to successfully complete courses.

Online teachers need to constantly discipline themselves to be diligent to ensure that “out of sight” does not mean “out of mind”. Support is important for online students. It does not take long for online students to fall behind and get discouraged.

There is the danger that the anonymity that comes along with a distance learning course lets the student “sit in the back of the virtual classroom” and not participate. **Getting these students engaged may be a challenge.**

→ Online Presence

The most recent research on online learning and success of students points to the practices in creating an online presence. Students are at a distance and it's important to create the right atmosphere that promotes and sustains learning. Much of the online community you create has a lot to do with emotional or social presence. Here's a list of suggestions:

- immediacy: creating an emotional or social presence has a lot to do with immediacy meaning that you should reply quickly to emails and discussion postings
- use a Discussion/Blog for a Q&A on a difficult concept or assignment
- use a Discussion/Blog for "How do you feel today"
- use Journals (in Discussion tool) to allow students to each have their PLE (personal learning environment)
- post a joke of the week
- use emoticons ☺ or ;) for a wink
- capitalize entire words ONLY when needed to add emphasis – using upper case for a whole message shows anger
- use camera pics of yourself showing different emotions, contort them with photo editing tools and post mini-icons in your messages
- keep a collection of royalty-free emoticons and use them on occasion
- add some audio to an announcement or for an introduction of a module
- here's a sample email with emotional presence

Hi Guys and Gals:

Just got home from a very hectic day, but I want to respond to some of the postings before I fall asleep at the dinner table ;-). Joe asked: "Do you have any ideas about ----- Where I work, we tried -----."

I have to agree with Gerry's very perceptive comment about the ----- .

What really frustrates me is that ----- Does anyone else feel the same?

Well, that's all for now. Guess I'll have a little dinner and see what's on the tube.

Cheers Sally

- add a Home Page topic called "Pace of the Course"; when should each module be completed?
- create a spreadsheet for students to use as a checklist to pace themselves; Module 1 to be completed by xx, xx, Module 2 to be completed by . . . etc.
- have a scavenger hunt to help students orient themselves to the interface
- offer virtual prizes for scavenger hunts or "first person to finish assignment xx"
- use medium size picture on your homepage or change the background; e.g. picture of you sitting on your desk
- always acknowledge emails and provide support; e.g. "Don't hesitate to email me if you have any other questions."
- take a snapshot of yourself talking to the class; use it in Announcements or other section



- take several snapshots of yourself with different facial expressions and keep them on file for quick release of announcements; add appropriate captions



Online or emotional presence has more to do with setting the climate and it needs to be managed. Do not let this get carried away beyond what you can manage. There's a delicate balance between allowing students to create the environment and having the teacher manage the environment. The manner in which you mediate the course, engage the students and communicate in a virtual environment have to match your personality and teaching style.



Summary

The topic of online pedagogy can be expanded into greater detail. Don't hesitate to read through some literature and take opportunities to attend seminars, workshops, and conferences in order to further extend your knowledge and professional development in this area.

Below is quick summary highlighting key points in this document.

- read through the course and assignments before the students do
- good teaching f2f is good teaching online
- intentionally pace the course
- communicate often
- engage the students in learning
- expect spending a lot of time with emails
- follow up quickly with students who do not participate
- know the local support systems of your students
- keep site facilitator(s) informed
- use announcements frequently to keep students informed
- create an online and emotional presence
- tell students how to succeed in your course
- learning is the focus, not the technology