



Recommendations for Online Teaching and Learning

[DRAFT]

Prepared by

Dr. Sam Akulli and Dr. Alex Akulli

Senior Consultants

Akulli & Associates, LLC

www.akulliandassociates.com

September 14, 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Explanatory Foreword

At VETU/ETS we operate a hybrid learning program, which enables residential and non-residential students to engage in the same study program. By “hybrid,” we mean that we utilize both “face to face” (in-person) and virtual (online) learning environments. Our non-resident students are required to be in Osijek for “face to face” learning during three separate intensive weeks per semester (beginning, mid-term, end of term), in which we attempt to deliver 50% of their classroom hours face to face. In between those intensive weeks non-residential students follow their courses via our Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) on the web page learn.evtos.hr, and through that medium receive the remainder of classroom hours via live conferences, recorded presentations, or other content. Indeed, all students, whether residential or non-residential, are required to follow the Moodle page since all of the course materials, assignments and information are organized on learn.evtos.hr.

Since the majority of our students are non-residential, however, developing and maintaining a high-quality online learning environment is vital to our school’s success. This academic year (2020-21) the COVID-19 pandemic has made this task even more urgent and important. According to current guidelines put forth by the Croatian state accrediting agency, we are planning for live “face to face” classroom delivery during our intensive weeks.

However, because many of our students reside in neighboring states, and because of the general uncertainties, we also need to be ready if the need arises to deliver our entire program online without any “face to face” in-person instruction. To that end, our goal is to develop all of our courses on our Moodle page with a consistent structure and format so that students can easily follow them and complete their work successfully, no matter how many face to face sessions we are able to deliver. This will serve our ultimate goal of providing a superior learning experience for our students.

Below are e-learning guidelines developed for us by Dr. Sam Akulli and Dr. Alex Akulli, which will help us become better teachers and facilitators of online learning so that we can serve our students in the best way possible. However, these principles for quality online learning are beneficial for any learning environment and delivery format. They are generally accepted “best practices” with some modifications for our own unique context and programs. In addition, while we are not currently accredited as an online program, the implementation of these practices and the development of our online delivery capabilities within our hybrid program will put us in a favorable position to seek accreditation for a completely online program in the next re-accreditation cycle, and therefore extend the ministry of VETU-ETS.

G. Thellman

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

Learning is a complex process that "is active, builds on prior knowledge, occurs in a complex social environment, is situated in an authentic context, and requires learners' motivation and cognitive engagement."ⁱ While we recognize that learning is enriched through authentic relationships that materialize best in physical spaces, we recognize that superior learning is also found in the online community of scholars. Online learning presents both tremendous opportunities and challenges for both instructors and students. Online learning crosses the boundaries of space and time and has the potential to make quality education accessible to nontraditional students, students from other territories, individuals in the workforce, etc. It also provides access to instructors from around the World. While we recognize the benefits, there are also challenges to overcome when conducting online learning. The goal of this document is to address some of those challenges. These challenges are not only present in online, but are also found in face2face learning, however, the "online" nature of online learning, could magnify these challenges if they are not addressed during the curriculum design process.

Quality online learning, similar to learning in a physical space, is a process with the following 5 characteristics: It is 1) active, 2) builds on prior knowledge, 3) occurs in the complex global environment of scholars, 4) is contextualized, and 5) requires learners' (instructor and student) motivation and cognitive engagement. This document provides Recommendations that are based on scientific knowledge, educational research, and literature review of best practices.

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

An article published in *Inside Higher Ed* recognizes that "...online classroom is different enough from the traditional one that faculty members and adjuncts need to create courses for digital delivery that are substantially different from those they teach on campus."ⁱⁱ The article notes *how* online and face2face learning are different, but it does not provide a plausible argument as *why* they are different. Online is different than face2face education on the following grounds: 1) Online classes require more time and work; 2) instructors find it challenging to fill the time in online courses, thus they deliver lengthy lectures; 3) engaging students is more challenging; 4) lessons are structured differently; 5) the "presence" of instructors changes its format; 6) Instructors lead differently, and 7) instructors hesitate to embrace multimedia assignment. These differences are in alignment with other literature and institutional practices with the addition of the following:ⁱⁱⁱ 7) structure of the curriculum for online learning in distinctive, and 8) instructors hesitate to embrace alternative evaluation.

While the characteristics listed above shed light on *how* online teaching and learning differs from face2face learning, the answer as to *why* they are different is found in Postman's eye-opening argument that "the medium changes the content."^{iv} Postman argues that the medium of communication (teaching/learning) also changes the content that is being communicated (taught/learned). The reason for this inevitable shift is based on the argument that "the medium" has its own epistemology. The online medium, just like face2face medium of teaching and learning have variant epistemologies. The online medium assumes that communication is quick and frequent. It assumes that students are motivated and engaged. It assumes that lectures are

short and engaging. It also assumes that ideas are easy to comprehend and that lectures should be entertaining. Thus, introducing a challenge, since ideas are complex, and lectures, although it should be engaging and enjoyable, might not always be entertaining. With the understanding of these challenges and recognizing the benefits and opportunities presented by online learning and the nature of the medium of instruction, the following Recommendations are warranted.

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

What is successful online teaching and learning?

“Its all about teaching habits. Those habits are built on the structures you put in place, and your habits are fueled by the connection you develop with the learners.”^v

Excellent Online teaching is about 1) Structures and 2) Connection, and it recognizes that learning transpires in a community of scholars where instructors are concurrently students.^{vi}

What follows is a list of online learning Recommendations designed for instructors.

STRUCTURES

1. Curriculum Structure:

- 1.1. Complete the curriculum layout in the Learning Management System (LMS) before the first day of the semester. If possible, the complete course should be complete and ready in Moodle before the first class. However, for those developing new courses, or putting courses in Moodle for the first time, this may not be possible. In that case, it is still helpful to have the overall layout in the course in Moodle, within which instructors can later add specific details (content, assignments, readings).
- 1.2. Organize the syllabus in sections. The duration of a semester is 15 weeks and syllabus should be organized in 4 sections, and all sections should have a similar structure. A section includes lecture(s), reading(s), assignment(s), and grading. All sections should have a similar structure. This does not suggest that the activities must be identical.
- 1.3. Consider and communicate to students the following: 1) the lecture provides a general overview of ideas; 2) reading requirements foster in depth learning; 3) assignments make possible the practical and theoretical application of ideas; and 4) grading (*formative assessment*) enhance learning through helpful feedback.
- 1.4. For asynchronous courses, conduct at least 1 live session during the first intensive week at the beginning of the semester in order to review the syllabus, expectations, assignments, and schedule proceeding live sessions.
- 1.5. Live sessions: If VETU/ETS is able to host the intensive weeks as planned, we will attain our goal of 50% of the classroom hours as “face2face” hours in the intensive weeks. If we cannot hold one or more of the intensive weeks in person because of pandemic restrictions, the intensive week schedule will remain unchanged, and instructors should plan to hold live sessions (not recordings) with students online per the intensive week schedule. At a minimum, instructors should have at least one live session with students per month, whether “face2face” in Osijek or via online conferencing.

Example 1: resident VETU lecturer holds live sessions in each intensive week of winter semester (Oct., Nov., Jan.). She should also require one (1) live session in December.

Example 2: non-resident VETU lecturer is planning to visit only for the third intensive week of the winter semester. He should plan at least one live session for each of the other three months (October, November, December).

- 1.6. One on one consultation with individual students: Instructors should plan to meet with each student individually for at least 15 minutes (BBB, Skype, Zoom or in-person during intensives) at least twice per semester for questions, clarifications and progress checks. At least one of these meetings should occur by the end of the first intensive week (Nov. 13).

2. **Evaluation:**

- 2.1. Consider the purpose of assessment – to facilitate and measure learning. Provide students a variety of learning assignments and assessments. Refrain from assigning too much weight to one assignment, such as a research paper or final exam. Instead, offer students multiple opportunities, throughout the term, to demonstrate learning. When the stakes are high, so is the temptation and inclination to cheat or plagiarize in the online space. Offer to students performance assessments opportunities that require them to write, speak, and present to the class. Engage students as co-creators of knowledge.

2.1.1. Note: Online quizzes and exams can be similar to what is administered in face2face settings. Depending on the design, however, online quizzes and exams can be timed, questions can be offered in randomized order, and student's answers can be autoscored – giving timely feedback to students and saving instructor's time to grade.

2.1.2. Additionally, one significant *downside* of timed quizzes and exams is that, if a student does not have high speed or reliable internet service, this can negatively impact student's score, it increases student dissatisfaction, stress, and anxiety, and provide inaccurate assessment results.

2.1.3. By design, however, online assessment can be more effective by replacing multiple choice or T/F questions with short answer or essays where students debate a topic from more than one perspective. For example, on a train ride from Zagreb to Osijek, two travelers, a Calvinist and a Progressive Dispensationalist, are seated across from each other, and during the journey they are having a conversation on the topic of "baptism". Please write a short (*define length and format*) essay capturing the main points of that debate. Instructor may also ask students to prepare a video recorded presentation and upload it in the Moodle discussion forum.

2.1.4. To discourage plagiarism, ask students to submit their work through a for-fee plagiarism detection service such as SafeAssign or TurnItIn. This approach can potentially deter and discourage cut-and-paste plagiarism. The course syllabus should have clear policies regarding academic integrity.

- 2.2. Organize evaluations based on sections (1-month sections). Every section has its own assignment(s), and the grade for all sections makes up the final grade. This will help the student stay motivated and on track, and it will provide sufficient feedback for improvement.
- 2.3. Incentivize the student's learning behavior by structuring evaluations accordingly (e.g. if the goal is to complete the reading assignment, require and evaluate students' reading notes).
- 2.4. Provide choice in your assignments and classroom activities that measure similar learning outcomes, in order to foster ownership.
- 2.5. Commit to grading and returning assignments within 5 days of submittal. This will provide students will valuable feedback to incorporate in the proceeding assignment.
- 2.6. Consider utilizing self-graded quizzes as teaching and not an evaluating tool. (e.g., ask students to take a short quiz or administer mini surveys during and after the lecture to gauge understanding and increase engagement; allow students to retake the quiz and track progress.)

CONNECTION

1. *Communication*

- 1.1. Provide frequent and clear communication.
- 1.2. Welcome students to your class via an email or a short video 7 days before the first day of the semester. Make sure to introduce yourself in the email. Remind and encourage students via email 1 day before the semester starts to familiarize themselves with the syllabus, requirements, and the structure of the Learning Management System (LMS).
- 1.3. Establish your online presence by being active in the LMS.
- 1.4. Send regular weekly announcements, reminders, tips, and encouragements via email. It is recommended that emails are sent the same day every week.^{vii}
- 1.5. Let students know your preferred method of communication.
- 1.6. Commit to respond to student's inquiries within 24 hours.
- 1.7. Commit to respond to student's LMS posts within 72 hours.
- 1.8. Remind students **constantly** that you are accessible and willing to help. This includes your willingness to meet with them virtually outside of class.
- 1.9. Make students aware of your communication commitments. Take the bold step and ask them to keep you accountable.
- 1.10. Reach out to disengaged and low-performing students early in the semester.^{viii}
Disengaged and low-performing students will consume a considerable amount of time at the end of the semester.
- 1.11. Demonstrate compassion. Instructors will learn a great amount about student's personal lives when they reach out.
- 1.12. Develop a student introduction section in LMS, such as a Forum or Wiki, and ask students to make a one-minute video self-introduction. This section will provide the instructor with the opportunity to know the students better. This could also be a graded exercise.^{ix}

1.13. Invite students to provide feedback about their experience in your class.^x

2. Other:

- 2.1. Write the welcome email in a word document and keep it handy for future classes.
- 2.2. Write your weekly emails (announcements, reminders, tips, encouragements) in a word document and keep it handy for future courses.
- 2.3. Overcommunicate.

ⁱ Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning. (2020.) *What Is Learning?* Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning. Retrieved March 11, 2020, from <https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/learn/what-learning>
Cited in Franklin university Learning System.

ⁱⁱ O'Malley, Sharon, <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/07/12/7-guidelines-effective-teaching-online>

ⁱⁱⁱ Guidelines and Standard Practices for Online Learning. <http://rochester.edu/online-learning/guidelines/index.html>,
Online Learning Guidelines, <https://www.ferris.edu/health-professions/Nursing/Online-Learning-Guidelines.htm>

^{iv} Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

^v Johnson, Aaron, *Excellent! Online Teaching: Effective Strategies for a Successful Semester Online*.

^{vi} Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

^{vii} *Excellent! Online Teaching: Effective Strategies for a Successful Semester Online*, p.1

^{viii} *Excellent! Online Teaching: Effective Strategies for a Successful Semester Online*, p.15-16

^{ix} *Excellent! Online Teaching: Effective Strategies for a Successful Semester Online*, p.8

^x *Excellent! Online Teaching: Effective Strategies for a Successful Semester Online*, p.3.