

Activate the Student-Preview Function of the Learning-Management System (LMS)

One of the ways to achieve your goals for each course is by ensuring that students are set up for success. Ensuring that students are prepared goes beyond course content and a thorough syllabus; it also involves the technical aspects of teaching online.

Research shows that students of online classes can become frustrated and disengage with the course if it is difficult to navigate to resources, forums, and other course functions (Darby, n.d.). We can organize course content from a student's point of view in order to reduce the probability of frustration with navigating the course.

Student-Preview Function of the LMS

The best way to know whether or not your course layout, resources, learning experiences, assignments, and forums are simple and straightforward for students to access is to navigate your course as if you were a student. Activate the student-preview function of the LMS, which allows you to see the course as your students will. This way, you can identify unclear navigation paths and check links to ensure that they lead to the intended resource.

Because you created the course, you are likely to know more than the average user, in which case it may be helpful to ask a colleague or teaching assistant to conduct this check to uncover areas of possible confusion. Track the number of clicks it takes to get to a file or resource and, if the path seems confusing, look for new locations for the link or resource.

Create a Tutorial

Keep in mind that online students are often on their own when they get stuck or feel frustrated, which is why many disengage. To help students feel more connected and cared for, you may choose to provide quick pointers either posted in a forum or emailed to students along with contact information for support services and tech support.

Additionally, you can use software on your computer, such as QuickTime Player, to create a video tutorial of your screen as you navigate to course materials and resources. In this video tutorial, you can also provide quick tips or pointers to students.

Sources

Darby, F. (n.d.). *How to be a better online teacher: Advice guide*. The Chronicle of Higher Education.
<https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching>

Conduct a Technology Check

Technology tools help us teach, learn, and communicate online effectively and efficiently. As these technologies are evolving with each year, they require time and effort on our parts to ensure that they are updated and working properly and that we are using them correctly (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Similar to the way in which classroom teachers might visit their classrooms before the first day of the course to ensure that everything is working properly, it is best practice for online teachers to conduct a technology check prior to the course start date.

Conducting the Technology Check

When conducting a technology check, you will want to:

- navigate file and resource paths;
- review all links to outside resources (blogs, articles, videos, etc. may be taken down or no longer available);
- double-check that all audio and video files are fully uploaded and accessible;
- ensure that students can download any assigned readings that you have posted;
- ensure that any quizzes that will be assigned are created and ready for students to take;
- consider sending an email to the entire class and asking each student to confirm receipt to make sure you have the correct contact information for all students.

This technology check will save course time by avoiding delays and other issues. It also saves you from having to quickly troubleshoot unexpected problems.

Synchronous Meetings

If you are attending or facilitating a synchronous meeting or discussion, conducting the technology check is even more important. Many of the meeting software programs and applications will work differently on every computer and browser, so it is best not to assume that because you have used something in the past it will work seamlessly. For instance, you may need to update your version of Zoom or Skype in order to use it—you do not want to be late to the meeting because you are waiting for the update to download to your computer. To avoid such issues, log on early and make sure that your video and audio are connected and working properly.

If you are leading the synchronous lecture or discussion, take the time to ensure that you are familiar with any tools, such as breakout rooms and whiteboard annotation, that you plan to use. You may even do a test run of the entire session ahead of time. If a function is not working or you are not very comfortable with it yet, it may be better to adjust the lesson or activities to avoid using them for now. Make a note to go back and learn how to use these functions and incorporate them into future sessions.

Source

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R. (2016). *Online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Welcome Email

Send a welcome email a few days or a week before the course start date to welcome students to the course, help set expectations, make the syllabus available, and prepare students for the first day and week of the course. Below is an example of a welcome email, along with some tips:

Greetings! You are receiving this email because you are registered for COMM 320, an online course that begins next Monday, February 3. This is my second year teaching the course online, and I really enjoy it. I hope you will too! I know that many students are new to online courses, so I just wanted to send this brief email to give you an idea of what to expect on the first day.

Strike a friendly tone.
Share your enthusiasm
for the course.

On Monday morning, you should receive an email invitation from Canvas (our campus's learning management system) to join the course. Accepting the invitation will lead you to our course site. Please accept the invitation and log on to the course on Monday morning before noon. Email me right away (simply reply to this message) if you have any issues logging on!

Address nervousness
about online courses.

The first module is the course "orientation," which includes information on how to navigate the course site, a detailed explanation of the syllabus (and a syllabus scavenger hunt), and an "introductions" forum. The purpose of the orientation module is to give everyone a chance to get familiar with the course environment, to get your questions answered, and to get to know your new classmates. The orientation module should take you no more than 1–2 hours to complete, and you will have until the end of our first day (Monday, February 3, at midnight) to complete it. Once you are done, you will be ready to jump right into coursework on Tuesday.

Set an early timeline to
preempt issues with
student access to the
course site.

As will be explained in more detail in the syllabus, although this course is online, it is not a self-paced course. There are deadlines each week, but you will be given a few days to complete each task so you can work at the times that are most convenient for you. The intent of this structure is to give each person enough flexibility to do the work when it is most convenient, while still allowing us to progress through the course material together.

Provide information
about what tasks need to
be completed first and by
when and set
expectations for
participation.

If it seems confusing, please do not worry . . . it will become clearer as we dive in. Please feel free to email me by replying to this email if you have any questions or concerns. Otherwise, I will see you on Monday in our online course site.

Tell students how to
reach you and end with a
reassuring note.

Until then!

Dr. Gist

Develop an Orientation Module

Students taking online courses often underestimate the time and effort required to succeed in this format (Bawa, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of an orientation module is to make sure that students understand how to be successful online, how to use the different features of the course, and how to meet course expectations (Stavredes, 2011). It can also be an opportunity for students to start to get to know one another and build community through syllabus activities.

Key Components of an Orientation Module

General information about online learning. This section offers students who may have little experience with online courses a list of proven suggestions, such as creating a plan that includes a weekly schedule of where to work, when to work, and the tools and technology they will need.

Weekly communication expectations. This section describes the weekly patterns students might follow to be successful in the course, such as “Each Monday, review the recorded micro-lecture and take the quiz. Each Wednesday, participate in the online discussion and every other Friday, submit your reflection paper.” Also, let students know where in the syllabus they can find the weekly schedule.

Navigating your online course. This section can include a recorded brief introductory video, with you narrating as you navigate through the key elements of the course, including important tools such as the gradebook, instructor contact information, course syllabus, supplementary materials, course calendar, course email, video chat tools, assignment uploading tools, collaboration tools, and where to go for technical assistance.

Syllabus activity. Try a syllabus activity to help students learn how to engage in the online platform and understand course expectations.

Open discussion/Q & A forum. Include an open discussion forum and encourage students to post any questions or comments about the course, the syllabus, or anything else in the orientation module. Keep this forum open throughout the course and continue to encourage students to post questions. Remind them that if they have a particular question, it is likely that other students do as well, so asking and answering questions in the open forum is helpful to everyone.

Sources

Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions—a literature review. *SAGE Open*, 6(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015621777>

Stavredes, T. (2011). *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for student success*. John Wiley & Sons.

Syllabus Activities

Use one or more of the activities below to ensure that students understand course expectations by reviewing the course syllabus and demonstrate the ability to engage in the online platform.

Activity 1. Syllabus Scavenger Hunt: A syllabus scavenger hunt can be made using the quiz function on your learning management system (LMS). Here are some example questions using fill-in-the-blank responses:

1. Whom do you contact for technical assistance?
2. How do you set up a meeting with your instructor?
3. When do you need to post an initial response to the weekly discussion board?
4. How many of your peers do you need to reply to?
5. What is the first guideline for online netiquette?
6. What is due on March 16?
7. When is your project proposal due?
8. What happens if you plagiarize?

Activity 2. Syllabus Discussion Board: Create a discussion board and require that all students post a question or comment about the course objectives, participation expectations, grading, or any other element of the syllabus. Example discussion questions include:

- What two key points or aspects of the syllabus caught your attention and why?
- What two key points or aspects of the syllabus need some further explanation?

In addition to creating a written record of questions and responses that may be useful later in the course, a discussion board also provides some early feedback as to what is important and/or confusing for the students. This activity also gives students the opportunity to practice posting. You can award a few points for successfully posting to the discussion board. Success breeds success, so starting all students off with a few earned points sets them on the right path.

Activity 3. Personalized and Customized Learning Outcomes: In order to have students think more deeply about the learning outcomes of your course and make connections to their own lives, ask students to choose one learning outcome listed in the syllabus that really resonates with them for personal or professional reasons. In a discussion board post, ask them to explain why they chose that outcome, how it connects to their goals or interests, and how they can customize the outcome to help them move toward their goal.

Building Community Online: Student Introductions

Creating intentional opportunities for students to get to know each other at the beginning of (and throughout) a course helps build trust and foster a sense of community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). These initial activities also provide a low-stakes opportunity to engage with the technology of the course, which is particularly helpful to students who are new to online learning. Introductions should serve as a fun and non-threatening icebreaker to ease students into the course, the course technology, and the learning community. Effective introduction activities, such as the ones suggested below, can require that students

- share something personal,
- read one another's entries,
- respond to other entries,
- find something in common with several others in the learning community, and
- be imaginative or to express genuine emotions or openness.

Some good introduction discussion prompts include:

- What experience do you have with this course topic?
- How does this course topic relate to your career or personal goals?
- If someone were to visit your town or your state for the first time, what are your top three recommendations of things to do, places to eat, or sights to visit?
- What was the best class (online or in person) that you ever had? Why was it so good?
- What was the worst class you ever took? Why was it so bad?
- What is your biggest fear or hope about engaging in online classes?

After posting an initial response to the prompt, ask students to find and reply to at least two or three students with whom they have something in common and two or three students who shared a perspective or experience different from their own. Instructors might also consider posting a brief hello or welcome message to each student as they introduce themselves as a way to let them know that you see and acknowledge them.

Note: In a large class, create smaller discussion groups (around 10 people) to keep discussion posts manageable.

Source

Conrad, R. M., & Donaldson, J. A. (2011). *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction*. Jossey-Bass.

Responding to Introductory Posts

Students in online classes often report feeling isolated and alone, which leads to them disengaging and even dropping out of the course. Positive feedback and relationship building with students in the classroom is known to increase participation and student performance. Similarly, research shows that online students have higher satisfaction with a course and their instructor when they feel connected and seen (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).

Instructors can help create this sense of connection and visibility with students by:

- greeting students
- sharing a personal connection to the course material
- using student names
- using personal anecdotes to further illustrate points
- thanking students for their contributions

It is important to create a sense of community for each online class. It is also important to realize that, as the instructor, you have a greater influence on developing the class community than anyone else. It is therefore essential to the overall success of the course that you maintain your presence in the online classroom.

Respond to Introductory Posts

Launch student introductions by posting your own introduction to the class as a model for students to follow. This might include where you live, your connection to the course material, some interests or hobbies outside of the course, and what you are hoping to accomplish in the course. Ask students to post their own introductions using yours as a model. After doing this, it is important to check the discussion forum regularly and make sure that you respond to every student post. You may even set a reminder for yourself to check for new posts and respond to them.

In each response to an introductory post, you can welcome the student to your class, thank them for posting, and add a note that connects personally to something the student shared in their post. You can also help foster community building by making connections between students who share things in common, for instance, if two students live in Arizona, or several students note baking as a hobby outside of the class.

All of these personal responses help students feel seen by you and demonstrate that you are invested in their experience and success.

Sample Response Posts

The following table includes sample introductory posts by students and sample instructor responses to the introductory posts.

Student introductory posts	Instructor response posts
Hi, I'm Amanda. I live in a small town outside of Denver, Colorado, with my two daughters and our three dogs. I'm excited to be learning about accounting software in this course as I'm also a bookkeeper for our small business of selling bird seed.	Hi Amanda, welcome to the course! Thank you for posting and letting us know more about you. I'm glad to hear that you already have a practical use for this course content. What type of bird seed does your company sell? I grew up bird-watching with my dad in Vermont.
Hello. My name is Devon. I just earned my undergrad degree in economics. I was a grocery clerk for a large company and was promoted to the inventory database when I graduated. I'm hoping this class will help me learn new ways of using my degree in this career.	Hi Devon, thank you for taking the time to post here. Welcome to the class and congratulations on your undergraduate degree and your promotion! Which school did you attend? I think this course will help you identify even more professional areas that you can use your experience and your education.
Hi everyone, I'm Hasan. I have been in accounting for several years, although my company uses outdated software so I'm hoping to find new ideas here that I can take back to the office. I currently live in Michigan with my wife, who is also an accountant.	Hi Hasan, welcome and thanks for posting! I'm sure you'll find a lot of useful information in this course that you can take back to the office. Did you know that Jeremiah in this class is also an accountant in Michigan? You may be helpful resources for each other.

Source

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Build Peer-to-Peer Relationships

Setting up peer support groups early in the course can encourage peer-to-peer relationships that serve to increase engagement and persistence. Begin by creating intentional opportunities for students to get to know one another to build trust and foster a sense of community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). You can also ask students to complete a simple survey that allows you to create peer groups of students with similar interests or availability.

Although some faculty may wait until they need their students to work on a group assignment or until after add/drop to create groups, establishing peer groups early on will begin to build community and engage students from the very beginning and may encourage students to stay in the course. If the groups are large enough (four or five students), it becomes easier to add late enrollments, and if a student drops, the group will still have enough members to be successful. Follow the strategies below to establish peer support groups.

“Getting to Know You” Discussion Forums

Introductions should serve as a fun and nonthreatening icebreaker to ease students into the course, the course technology, and the learning community. These “getting to know you” discussion forums will provide you with information on which to create the groups and a starting point for the groups you create. Effective introduction activities, such as the ones suggested below, should require that students:

- share something personal,
- read and respond to one another’s entries,
- respond to other entries,
- find something in common with several others in the learning community, and
- be imaginative or express genuine emotions or openness.

Some good introduction discussion prompts include:

- What experience do you have with this course topic?
- How does this course topic relate to your career goals?
- If someone were to visit your town or your state for the first time, what are your top five recommendations of things to do, places to eat, or sights to visit?
- What was the best class (online or in person) that you ever had? Why was it so good?
- What was the worst class you ever took? Why was it so bad?
- What is your biggest fear or hope about engaging in online classes?

Survey Questions

Creating an initial survey using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or a survey tool in your LMS will allow you to gather information regarding preferences for communicating with team members. Possible survey questions include:

- What is your preferred form of communication?
 - phone, text, email, chat, in person
- When do you prefer to work?
 - morning, afternoon, early evening, late evening
- Do you work?
 - full time, part time, full-time student

Forming Groups

You can use both the responses and the ways students interact in the discussion forum to make groups. For example, you can form groups of students who have similar interests. Or, you may want to consider spreading students who post early and often throughout the groups rather than placing them all in one group. You can also use the results of the preferred communication and schedule survey to create groups that have similar approaches to coursework.

Source

Conrad, R. M., & Donaldson, J. A. (2011). Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction. Jossey-Bass.