Title: **Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses**
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The "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," originally published in the *AAHE Bulletin* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), are a popular framework for evaluating teaching in traditional, face-to-face courses. The principles are based on 50 years of higher education research (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). A faculty inventory (Johnson Foundation, "Faculty," 1989) and an institutional inventory (Johnson Foundation, "Institutional," 1989) based on these principles have helped faculty members and higher-education institutions examine and improve their teaching practices.

We, a team of five evaluators from Indiana University's Center for Research on Learning and Technology (CRLT), recently used these principles to evaluate four online courses in a professional school at a large Midwestern university. (The authors are required to keep the identity of that university confidential.—Ed.) The courses were taught by faculty members who also taught face-to-face courses. Conducted at the joint request of faculty and administration, the evaluations were based on analysis of online course materials, student and instructor discussion-forum postings, and faculty interviews. Although we were not permitted to conduct student interviews (which would have enriched the findings), we gained an understanding of student experiences by reading postings to the discussion forum.

Taking the perspective of a student enrolled in the course, we began by identifying examples of each of Chickering and Gamson's seven principles. What we developed was a list of "lessons learned" for online instruction that correspond to the original seven principles. Since this project involved practical evaluations for a particular client, they should not be used to develop a set of global guidelines. And since our research was limited in scope and was more qualitative than quantitative, the evaluations should not be considered a rigorous research project. Their value is to provide four case studies as a stimulus for further thought and research in this direction.

Principle 1: Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact

Lesson for online instruction: *Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students.* Instructors wanted to be accessible to online students but were apprehensive about being overwhelmed with e-mail messages or bulletin board postings. They feared that if they failed to respond quickly, students would feel ignored. To address this, we recommend that student expectations and faculty concerns be mediated by developing guidelines for student-instructor interactions. These guidelines would do the following:

- Establish policies describing the *types* of communication that should take place over different channels. Examples are: "Do not send technical support questions to the instructor; send them to techsupport@university.edu." Or: "The public discussion forum is to be used for all communications except grade-related questions."
- Set clear standards for instructors' *timelines* for responding to messages. Examples: "I will make every effort to respond to e-mail within two days of receiving it" or "I will respond to e-mails on Tuesdays and Fridays between three and five o'clock."

Principle 2: Good Practice Encourages Cooperation Among Students

Lesson for online instruction: *Well-designed discussion assignments facilitate meaningful cooperation among students.*

In our research, we found that instructors often required only "participation" in the weekly class discussion forum. As a result, discussion often had no clear focus. For example, one course required each of four students in a group to summarize a reading chapter individually and discuss which summary should be submitted. The communication within the group was shallow. Because the postings were summaries of the same reading, there were no substantive differences to debate, so that discussions often focused on who wrote the most eloquent summary.

At the CRLT, we have developed guidelines for creating effective asynchronous discussions, based on substantial experience with faculty members teaching online. In the study, we applied these guidelines as recommendations to encourage meaningful participation in asynchronous online discussions. We recommended the following:

- Learners should be required to participate (and their grade should depend on participation).
- Discussion groups should remain small.
- Discussions should be focused on a task.
- Tasks should always result in a product.
- Tasks should engage learners in the content.
- Learners should receive feedback on their discussions.
- Evaluation should be based on the quality of postings (and not the length or number).
- Instructors should post expectations for discussions.

Principle 3: Good Practice Encourages Active Learning

Lesson for online instruction: *Students should present course projects.*

Projects are often an important part of face-to-face courses. Students learn valuable skills from presenting their projects and are often motivated to perform at a higher level. Students also learn a great deal from seeing and discussing their peers' work.

While formal synchronous presentations may not be practical online, instructors can still provide opportunities for projects to be shared and discussed asynchronously. Of the online courses we evaluated, only one required students to present their work to the class. In this course, students presented case study solutions via the class Web site. The other students critiqued the solution and made further comments about the case. After all students had responded, the case presenter updated and reposted his or her solution, including new insights or conclusions gained from classmates. Only at the end of all presentations did the instructor provide an overall reaction to the cases and specifically comment about issues the class identified or failed to identify. In this way, students learned from one another as well as from the instructor.

Principle 4: Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback

Lesson for online instruction: *Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback.*

We found during the evaluation that there were two kinds of feedback provided by online instructors: "information feedback" and "acknowledgement feedback." Information feedback provides information or evaluation, such as an answer to a question, or an assignment grade and comments. Acknowledgement feedback confirms that some event has occurred. For example, the instructor may send an e-mail acknowledging that he or she has received a question or assignment and will respond soon.

We found that instructors gave prompt information feedback at the beginning of the semester, but as the semester progressed and instructors became busier, the frequency of responses decreased, and the response time increased. In some cases, students got feedback on postings after the discussion had already moved on to other topics. Clearly, the ideal is for instructors to give detailed personal feedback to

each student. However, when time constraints increase during the semester's busiest times, instructors can still give prompt feedback on discussion assignments by responding to the class as a whole instead of to each individual student. In this way, instructors can address patterns and trends in the discussion without being overwhelmed by the amount of feedback to be given.

Similarly, we found that instructors rarely provided acknowledgement feedback, generally doing so only when they were behind and wanted to inform students that assignments would be graded soon. Neglecting acknowledgement feedback in online courses is common, because such feedback involves purposeful effort. In a face-to-face course, acknowledgement feedback is usually implicit. Eye contact, for example, indicates that the instructor has heard a student's comments; seeing a completed assignment in the instructor's hands confirms receipt.

Principle 5: Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task

Lesson for online instruction: *Online courses need deadlines.*

One course we evaluated allowed students to work at their own pace throughout the semester, without intermediate deadlines.

The rationale was that many students needed flexibility because of full-time jobs. However, regularly distributed deadlines encourage students to spend time on tasks and help students with busy schedules avoid procrastination. They also provide a context for regular contact with the instructor and peers.

Principle 6: Good Practice Communicates High Expectations

Lesson for online instruction: *Challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work communicate high expectations.*

Communicating high expectations for student performance is essential. One way for instructors to do this is to give challenging assignments. In the study, one instructor assigned tasks requiring students to apply theories to real-world situations rather than remember facts or concepts. This case-based approach involved real-world problems with authentic data gathered from real world situations.

Another way to communicate high expectations is to provide examples or models for students to follow, along with comments explaining why the examples are good. One instructor provided examples of student work from a previous semester as models for current students and included comments to illustrate how the examples met her expectations. In another course, the instructor provided examples of the types of interactions she expected from the discussion forum. One example was an exemplary posting while the other two were examples of what *not* to do, highlighting trends from the past that she wanted students to avoid.

Finally, publicly praising exemplary work communicates high expectations. Instructors do this by calling attention to insightful or
well-presented student postings.

Principle 7: Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

Lesson for online instruction: *Allowing students to choose project topics incorporates diverse views into online courses.*

In several of the courses we evaluated, students shaped their own coursework by choosing project topics according to a set of guidelines. One instructor gave a discussion assignment in which students researched, presented, and defended a current policy issue in the field. The instructor allowed students to research their own issue of interest, instead of assigning particular issues.

As instructors give students a voice in selecting their own topics for course projects, they encourage students to express their own diverse points of view. Instructors can provide guidelines to help students select topics relevant to the course while still allowing students to share their unique perspectives.

Conclusion

The "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" served as a practical lens for our team to evaluate four online courses in an accredited program at a major U.S. university. Using the seven principles as a general framework for the evaluation gave us insights into important aspects of online teaching and learning. A comprehensive report of the evaluation findings is available in a CRLT technical report (Graham, et al., 2000).

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