Brooklyn College | Center For Teaching and Learning

Quick-Start Guide to Asynchronous Online Teaching

Purpose and Goals

This guide is intended to be used as a source of quick and easy ideas and resources for those new to asynchronous online (AO) instruction, or those looking to improve their current practice. AO courses can present a challenge to instructors due to the perceived lack of “face time” and interaction with students, which can give these classes a different feel from in-person classes. But with careful attention to course design, implementation, and evaluation, these classes can be highly effective and successful.

An Important Note

This guide is loosely based on elements of the CTL’s Teach in Ten course, which is available on Blackboard. We highly recommend you enroll in this self-paced course. This guide is mean as a helpful starting point, but the Teach in Ten program provides greater detail, activities, resources, and feedback as you design a course, syllabus, and other materials. You can register for Teach in Ten here.

Getting Started

When you get started designing a new AO course, or adapting an old course to AO, there are a few things to keep in mind based on practical experience, Universal Design in Learning principles, and the use of a syllabus.

Make Sure You Know (and Communicate) How the Modality Will Work

Few things are more frustrating to students (and instructors) than not knowing how a course operates. In order to provide clarity, the instructor must first decide how the course will operate! For example, will there be multimodal content such as videos? How and when will they be recorded? Will they be embedded in a Learning Management System or on another platform like YouTube? If on YouTube will the videos be public or private? The world is your oyster with the number of technology options out there, but figuring out the mechanics, making sure they work, explaining

them in the syllabus, and testing them beforehand (with a minimally tech savvy friend or relative) are important steps in effective roll-out.

Identify Your Learning Goals/Outcomes and Work Backwards

As in an in-person class, begin with what you'd like students to get out the class and take into their futures, and work backwards. Goals should be:

1. Student centered, meaning focused on skills and ways of thinking that students can master.
2. Observable, meaning students can demonstrate their proficiency to you in a quantifiable manner.
3. Specific, meaning that students can understand and direct their efforts towards the goal.

Be mindful of the fact that modality plays a role in what can be demonstrated or measured. Consider how a student can demonstrate a chosen skill when working remotely, and think about the best method of evaluating those skills. What works in a face-to-face setting won't always transfer to AO.

Explore Universal Design in Learning Principles

Universal Design in Learning (UDL) is a set of principles that encourages equity and serves diverse leanring needs. Simplified, it asks us to think about multiple means of engagement, representation, accessibility, and forms of expression. Many of these principles call for different types of activities that reflect different types of learning, encourage critical and self-directed learning methods, and engage different parts of students' brains and experiences. One important element is to break the course into modules based on your learning goals and then match content and assessment to those goals. In short, the modules should reflect desired areas content and ways of thinking, helping to guide students through the course. Assessments should do the same. Click here for more information on UDL.

Using Backward Design

Similarly, backward design of course content allows an instructor to start with learning goals and desired outcomes of the course and design activities and assessments to match those goals. Start by thinking about what you want students to get out of your course, then work backwards to structure activities and assessments that move the

class towards those goals. This is in contrast to a traditional approach in which an instructor starts with the idea of a midterm and final exam and uses the reading list to develop learning goals and outcomes.

Collaboration

Collaboration and interaction help recreate some advantages of in-person learning, such as building a sense of community and encouraging students develop a support structure. It is not, however, without its challenges. The classic example would be group work where some participants contribute than others. One strategy for avoiding this situation is to use low-stakes assessment or self-assessment on collaborative work, so those who worry more about grades do not feel pressured to do more.

Scaffolding/Modeling

Modeling is when an instructor works through a task, then has the class take it on, then passes the task to groups, and finally, to individuals (this is sometimes also called scaffolding). This process helps students get comfortable with a task or way of thinking before being asked to embrace it on their own. Once students gain experience with a particular way of learning, new ideas and activities can be attached to the scaffold. The instructor takes on the role of a mentor and facilitator as students gain experience, rather than dumping a bunch of daunting information that students have to memorize. For examples of how this kind of scaffolding works, click here

Be Transparent, Clear, and Flexible

About everything. **This is critical!** For many students, the first time in an AO class can be just as jarring as it can be for instructors. Concise yet clear instructions on the syllabus and in other communications are key to everyone's success. There is also value in other communications, like a weekly email that outlines what's happening in the class, as well as a weekly course rhythm as part of your syllabus. The weekly rhythm shows students how you would approach the course in a typical week, for example reading on Monday, watching videos on Tuesday, and writing your discussion post on Wednesday. It also includes information on what the instructor is doing, so students know when videos will be posted, when they can expect discussion post feedback, and so on. In short, the weekly rhythm allows students to feel that the class is predictable and stable, which can be an elusive goal when you're not meeting on a set day and time. If something is not working, however, it is often a good idea to engage students in

conversation about how to improve and flexibly alter courses midstream to better serve both the students' and instructor's needs and goals.

Even when you do your part and provide clear instructions, students might still mistunderstand. It's important, therefore, to check in in on students, at least for the first few weeks. If you see that someone hasn't accessed course material, reach out to talk. They might not grasp the nature of the course or its deadlines. For example, maybe they think that "asynchronous" means "make your own deadlines." Try to catch these students before they fall too far behind.

Building Engagement as the course Progresses

A persistent challenge in AO classes is ensuring that students are engaged. You have to make sure that students are following along, not falling behind, and getting what you hope out of the course.

Periodic Check-Ins

One strategy for building engagement is to check in with students—either one-on-one or in small groups—every so often to ensure that they are getting the most out of the course. Check-ins could take the form of soliciting feedback. The worst time to find out that something went wrong is at the end of a course, when you are reading final projects or course evaluations. Mid-semester feedback can also help build a sense of community by allowing students to act as partners in course design, helping to identify whether the course is meeting their needs and expectations.

Short Videos and Short, Low-Stakes Assignments

AO courses need materials that are engaging and digestible, and this can be challenging to provide. Shorter videos, modularized into chunks of 15 minutes or less, provide flexibility that long videos don't. Students are more likely to maintain focus while watching brief clips. Similarly, a 20-page paper may be daunting, but a series of ten two-page papers over the course of the semester adds up to the same amount of writing in a much more palatable form. In each case, shorter presentations and assingments help for mid-semester assessment of progress. Instructors have the opportunity to gain understanding of student experiences and strengths, and review difficult concepts where necessary. This often fills a need for instructors who are used to (and miss) informal classroom communication about how it's going.

No matter what type of assignments you give, some form of regular, continuous assessment is crucial an an AO course. It keeps stueets engaged and gives you ample opportunity to intervene when necessary.

Create Clear Assignments with Built-In Feedback

While assignments are often thought of only as a way to test learning, they can also be part of the learning process, supporting learning goals. One way to achieve this is to ensure that assignment criteria are clear, by using detailed instructions, recorded guidelines, and a written rubric (accommodating different learning styles like this is a classic example of UDL). Being transparent about the goals of an assignment and how it will be graded gives students with a window into the learning process. This encourages them to develop as independent thinkers rather than just robots who regurgitate material you've presented.

Written feedback provided after final grading is often ignored, so consider building peer or instructor feedback into an assignment. For example, use a low stakes first draft and a higher stakes second draft that incorporates others' knowledge, points of view, or opinions. Being clear up front and building feedback into the core of assignments can help develop support structures and conversations that convert assessment from an individual testing strategy into a collaborative learning strategy.

Design Enjoyable Activities with Real World Relevance

Finally, because AO courses are often self-directed and students have many obligations outside of school, it's important to develop learning activities that students look forward to. Make your course content relevant to their own experience and goals. For example, ask them to write in a professional style on the course topic, producing a review or an elevator pitch. Consider a multimedia assignment such as creating a short podcast, video, or even a webpage if relevant. Scaffold these assignments and keep the elements compact enough so that they can be completed without too great a time commitment. And build activities off each other so students can develop familiarity with the task at hand. Once they learn the skills they need, they can complete assignments more effectively, making them more likely to stick with the course material.

Additional Resources

Ideas for Fostering Student Interaction (from SUNY's OSCQR rubric)

Guide to Universal Design for Learning

Interactive Activities for Asynchronous Courses

Formative Assessments & Scaffolding in Asynchronous Courses

Blackboard Grading Rubrics