



A Peer Review Guide for Online Courses at Penn State

Background

In 1987, Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson published “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” a summary of 50 years of higher education research that addressed good teaching and learning practices. Their findings, and faculty and institutional evaluation instruments based on the findings, have been widely used to guide and improve college teaching.

While instruments such as the Student Rating of Teaching Effectiveness (SRTE) provide a measure of student satisfaction with a course, the Seven Principles provide a useful framework to evaluate the effectiveness of online teaching and learning. Therefore, this *Peer Review Guide* adapts the Seven Principles to facilitate the peer review of online courses in both undergraduate and graduate level online courses at Penn State. Each principle is described in detail, including evidence of how a principle may be met. Examples of evidence to look for and resources for additional information are also included.

The Seven Principles

Good practice:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty;
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. Encourages active learning;
4. Gives prompt feedback;
5. Emphasizes time on task;
6. Communicates high expectations; and
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Chickering, A. & Gamson, Z. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin* (39)7.

While, ideally, good practice would suggest that all seven principles would be supported in some way in an online course, variations in course format, size, and faculty teaching experience can make reaching that ideal difficult. Like the SRTE, where achieving an overall score of “7” is rare, it is assumed that a peer reviewer will discover room for improvement when examining a course through the lens of the Seven Principles. This Peer Review Guide provides space for the peer reviewer to note teaching and learning strengths, as well as areas for improvement.

Recommended Peer Review Process

Peer reviews of teaching are required for promotion and tenure at Penn State. We also need to conduct peer reviews for our part-time faculty members who teach online and at a distance. University Policy HR23 states, “Each academic unit (e.g., department, college, and University Libraries) of the University should take responsibility for developing detailed review procedures, supplemental to and consonant with general University procedures, as guidelines for promotion and tenure.” To help facilitate the peer review of online courses, we recommend the following peer review process:

1. The department/division head or school director or, where appropriate, campus chancellor and campus director of academic affair, identifies a faculty peer (“peer reviewer”) to conduct the peer review of teaching.
2. The course instructor completes the “Instructor Input Form” and shares that document with the peer reviewer to convey contextual information about the course.
3. After reviewing the completed “Instructor Input Form,” the peer reviewer uses the “Peer Review Guide for Online Courses” to work through the online course, observing how well the instructor addresses each of the Seven Principles. The reviewer notes the instructor’s strengths and areas for improvement for each Principle in the space provided.

NOTE: Reviewers should feel free to ask questions of the instructor any time clarification or information is needed during the review process.

4. The peer reviewer summarizes the feedback in the form of a letter to that instructor that can be included in the instructor’s dossier. The letter, as well as a copy of the completed Peer Review Guide, is then shared with the instructor, the Program Manager (if the course is part of an online program), and the department/division head or school director or, where appropriate, campus chancellor and campus director of academic affairs.

For **provisional faculty** (not yet tenured), it is recommended that peer reviews should occur at least once per year and in a variety of courses. Faculty being **reviewed for promotion**, it is better to have a series of peer reviews over time rather than several in the fall immediately preceding the review.

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Instructor: _____, Course: _____, Date: _____

Principle 1: Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty.

Frequent and timely student-faculty contact is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement, particularly in a distance education environment. Evidence of faculty concern helps students get through challenging situations and inspires them to persevere. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

Examples of evidence to look for:

- A "welcome message" is provided at the beginning of the course that encourages student-to-instructor contact for course-related discussions or concerns.
- The instructor encourages and fosters a healthy exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences among course participants.
- The instructor initiates contact with, or respond to, students on a regular basis in order to establish a consistent online presence in the course (and prior notice is given to students in the event that the instructor will be unavailable for more than a few days, such as might be the case during professional travel).
- A prominent announcement area is used to communicate important up-to-date course information to students, such as reminders of impending assignment due dates, curriculum changes, scheduled absences, etc.
- The instructor holds regular office hours, and by appointment, that are mediated by technology (e.g., the telephone, chat areas, web conferencing) to accommodate distance students.
- Student inquiries are responded in a timely manner.
- The instructor provides students with interaction space for study groups, "hall way conversations," etc.

Where to look:

- Discussion forums
- E-mail messages
- Posted announcements
- Course syllabus
- Chat space

Resources:

- "Managing Your Online Class" - <http://facdev.e-education.psu.edu/teach/manage>
- "Ice-breakers" - http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/pointersclickers/2002_01/index.asp
- "21st Century Icebreakers: 13 Ways To Get To Know Your Students With Technology" - <http://teachbytes.com/2012/08/05/21st-century-icebreakers-10-ways-to-get-to-know-your-students-with-technology/>

Feedback for the Instructor

Evidence Found:

Strengths:

Areas for Improvement:

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<p>Principle 3: Good practice encourages active learning.</p> <p>Active learning methods engage students in the learning process by encouraging them to discover, process, and apply information. Empirical support for the positive impact of active learning on student achievement is extensive.¹</p> <p>Examples of evidence to look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student activities that involve one or more of the followingⁱⁱ:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Active use of writing, speaking, and other forms of self-expression○ Opportunity for information gathering, synthesis, and analysis in solving problems (including the use of library, electronic/computer and other resources, and quantitative reasoning and interpretation, as applicable)○ Engagement in collaborative learning activities○ Application of intercultural and international competence○ Dialogue pertaining to social behavior, community, and scholarly conduct○ For General Education courses, three or more of these activities are integrated into courses offered in the knowledge domains (http://www.psu.edu/ufs/geic/framework.html):• Opportunities for students to “customize” their learning by tailoring assignments to their personal and professional interests and needs.• Examples of student work where they<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Think, talk, or write about their learning○ Reflect, relate, organize, apply, synthesize, or evaluate information○ Perform research, lab or studio work, or physical activities○ Participate in, design, or develop educational games and simulations. <p>Where to look:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course syllabus• Instructional materials• Assignment dropboxes• e-Portfolios• Discussion forums <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Active Learning (Illinois State University) - http://cte.illinois.edu/resources/topics/methods/active.html• “Promoting Active Learning” - https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/learning-resources/promoting-active-learning• “Inquiry-based Learning” - http://www.schreyerinstitution.psu.edu/pdf/IBL.pdf• Move over Socrates: Online Discussion is Here - http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/NCP0330.pdf	<p style="text-align: center;">Feedback for the Instructor</p> <p>Evidence Found:</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <p>Areas for Improvement:</p>
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<p>Principle 5: Good education emphasizes time on task.</p> <p>The frequency and duration of study, as well as effective time management skills, are critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning to manage and prioritize their study time.</p> <p>Examples of evidence to look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A published course schedule that outlines topics to be covered and assignment due dates so students can plan their workload accordingly.• Information on the course syllabus that provides an estimate of the amount of time students should spend on the course (e.g., “On average, most students spend eight hours per week working on course assignments. Your workload may be more or less depending on your prior experience with computing and the Web in general, and with this subject in particular.”)• Time-to-completion information on course assignments (e.g., “This assignment should take you approximately 2 hours to complete.”)• Course-specific study tips that provide students with strategies for utilizing their time well.• Assignment feedback that provides students with information on where to focus their studies.• Assignment due dates and timeframes that take into account the nature of the target audience. For example, a course targeted to working adult professionals might incorporate a weekend into an assignment timeframe.• Course statistics that demonstrate that time-to-completion and weekly time-on-task estimates are on target. <p>Where to look:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course syllabus• Instructional materials / Assignment directions• Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios• Log in and other access data in the LMS <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Online Course Design: Time on Task” - https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/tls/sites/rit.edu/academicaffairs.tls/files/docs/Course%20Design_Online_Time%20on%20Task_v1.5.pdf• iStudy Module (for students) on Time Management - http://tutorials.istudy.psu.edu/timemanagement/• How Students Develop Online Learning Skills (<i>Educause Review</i>)- http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/EDUCAUSEQuarterlyMagazineVolum/HowStudentsDevelopOnlineLearn/157435	<p style="text-align: center;">Feedback for the Instructor</p> <p>Evidence Found:</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <p>Areas for Improvement:</p>
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<p>Principle 6: Good practice communicates high expectations.</p> <p>As the saying goes, “if you don’t know where you are going, how will you know when you get there?” Effective instructors have high, but reasonable, expectations for their students. They clearly communicate those expectations and provide support to their students in their efforts to meet those expectations.</p> <p>Examples of evidence to look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicit communication of the skills and knowledge every student needs to have in order to be successful in the course.• Explanation of course learning goals and how assignments are designed to help students achieve those goals.• Frequent feedback provided to students through written explanations and detailed feedback on assignments.• Motivation and encouragement that inspires students to move past the easy answers to more complex solutions.• Routine use of critical and probing questions when communicating with students about course assignments and activities.• Examples and non-examples of high quality work, along with a discussion of the differences between these.• Examples of student work that demonstrate advancement toward learning goals. <p>Where to look:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course syllabus• Instructional materials / Assignment directions• Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Student Learning Goals and Outcomes” - http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/developingstudentlearninggoalsobjectives.pdf• “Assessing and Grading Student Writing” - http://www.units.miamioh.edu/writingcenter/facultyresources/Grading.html• Authentic Assessment Toolbox - http://jfmuller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/index.htm	<p style="text-align: center;">Feedback for the Instructor</p> <p>Evidence Found:</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <p>Areas for Improvement:</p>
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<p>Principle 7: Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.</p> <p>People bring different talents and styles of learning to the learning environment. Some bring a wealth of relevant experience to a course, while others may be new to the topic at hand. Likewise, students who are strong in a discussion situation may be less adept at lab or studio work. Students need the opportunity to demonstrate their talents and to “personalize” their learning so that it is relevant to them. It is also important to give students opportunities to learn in ways that may be less comfortable in order to improve their learning skills.</p> <p>Examples of evidence to look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of a variety of assessment tools that gauge student progress.• Alternative assignment options that allow students to demonstrate their progress in a manner that is best conducive to their talents. For example, a podcast might be allowed as learning evidence instead of a written paper.• Supplemental online materials are provided to students who lack prerequisite knowledge or who would benefit from having content presented in an alternative manner.• Timely, corrective feedback for online activities.• A positive online climate where students are encouraged to seek assistance with course content and learning activities if needed.• A policy for accommodations that is stated on the course syllabus.• Accommodations are proactively offered for students with disabilities. <p>Where to look:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course syllabus• Instructional materials / Assignment directions• Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios• Discussion forums <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Learning effectively by understanding your learning preferences” – http://www.mindtools.com/mnemlsty.html• “Classroom Assessment Techniques” - https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/cats/• “Accessibility and Usability at Penn State” - http://accessibility.psu.edu/• Office of Disability Services Faculty Handbook - http://equity.psu.edu/ods/faculty-handbook	<p style="text-align: center;">Feedback for the Instructor</p> <p>Evidence Found:</p> <p>Strengths:</p> <p>Areas for Improvement:</p>
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¹ Prince, M. (July 2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93, 3, 223-232.

ⁱⁱ Senate Committee on Curricular Affairs (2001). A clarification of ‘active learning’ as it applies to general education (Legislative). Located at <http://senate.psu.edu/scca/curricular%20affairs%20reports/2-01%20CA%20RPT%202.pdf>