A Peer Review Guide for Online Teaching at Penn State

Background

In 2022, the University’s the Joint Implementation Task Force on Teaching Assessment identified four elements of effective teaching, as evident through research and related literature:

- Effective Course Design
- Effective Instruction
- Inclusive and Ethical Pedagogy
- Reflective and Evolving Practice

Importantly, these four elements of effective teaching are not exhaustive. Rather, they are distilled from a substantial literature on effective teaching as those that provide a meaningful throughline in self, peer, and student perspectives on effective teaching. Likewise, these four elements are not mutually exclusive.

This peer review guide addresses all four elements of effective teaching and is based on an extensive review of more than 50 years of research focused on effective higher education teaching and learning practices. In 1987, the resulting “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” was published by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, distilling the research findings into seven core principles. Their findings, and faculty and institutional evaluation instruments based on the findings, have stood the test of time and have been widely used to guide and improve college teaching ever since.

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.

This *Peer Review Guide* adapts the Seven Principles to facilitate the peer review of online teaching in both undergraduate and graduate level online courses at Penn State. Each principle is described in detail and include examples of evidence of how a principle may be met. Suggested resources are also provided to facilitate professional development.

Using icons, each of the seven principles is associated with at least one of the University’s four elements of effective teaching:

- Effective Course Design
- Effective Instruction
- Inclusive and Ethical Pedagogy
- Reflective and Evolving Practice

While, ideally, good practice would suggest that all seven principles would be supported in some way in one’s teaching, variations in course format, size, and faculty teaching experience can make reaching that ideal difficult. 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. Thus, in total, the examination of each principle is designed to contribute to the final element of effective teaching:

A 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 teaching, the following peer review process is suggested:

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 observe how 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.
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 responds to, students on a regular basis 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, “hallway conversations,” etc.

Where to look:

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

Resources:

- Creating Community
- Managing Your Online Class -
- Icebreaker Ideas for Students Learning Remotely
- 50 Distance Learning Icebreakers and Games

Feedback for the Instructor

Evidence Found:

- Introductory video.
- Syllabus (Engagement and Communication section)
- Discussion forums
- Canvas Announcements

Strengths:

- Introductory video provides a good overview of the course and his expectations. In the video, he also encourages students to use group or personal office hours if they have questions.
- There is a prominent announcement area that is used to communicate important up-to-date course information to students.
- Syllabus states, “I will also hold individual or group virtual office hours during the course to discuss any concerns or feedback on how the course is tracking,” and clarifies that the best way to contact is through Canvas email.
- was active in some of the discussions via discussion forums.

Areas for Improvement:

- More consistent presence in weekly Lesson Discussion forums. I would suggest posting each week to confirm suggestions of peers and highlight particularly thoughtful novel ideas.
- More consistency and structure in the posted announcement. Post a weekly announcement including ideas for that whole week. It would be good to include in the announcement title the number of lesson or 1. For example, like the one you entitled “Lesson 3 – Lesson 3:”. It would be great if all announcements followed the same format so that students can quickly look for information there if required.
- It seems that not all course announcements were posted in the Canvas announcements space, especially at the beginning of the term. If that is the case, it would be good to post all announcements there. Those announcements can also serve as a repository of information about the class for students as well.
**Principle 2: Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students**

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding.

**Examples of evidence to look for:**
- Regular opportunities for students to engage in one or more of the following activities:
  - Formal and/or informal discussions of course topics
  - Collaborative course assignments
  - Study groups
- A “meet one another” activity at the beginning of the course so students can begin to make personal connections.
- Encouragement to students to strengthen their online presence in the course by sharing links to their e-portfolio, personal Web site, and/or posting a photo of themselves to the class Web space (e.g., their LMS profile).
- Group assignments that follow the basic tenants of cooperative learning (see Resources, below) to avoid the common pitfalls of “group work.”
- An explanation of the criteria for “good” discussion participation.
- Modeling of good discussion participation practices by the instructor.
- Discussion prompts that help to guide and elicit student participation in class discussion activities.
- Instructor facilitation of class discussions by encouraging, probing, questioning, summarizing, etc.
- Student interaction space(s) for study groups, “hallway conversations,” etc.

**Where to look:**
- Instructional materials / Assignment directions
- Discussion forums
- E-mail messages
- Course syllabus
- Chat space

**Resources:**
- An Overview of Cooperative Learning
- Creating Community
- How-to Facilitate Robust Online Discussions

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**Feedback for the Instructor**

**Evidence Found:**
- Course syllabus identifying group activities.
- Directions for the discussion forums

**Strengths:**
- There are a few activities during the term that require group work. Activities to create group story maps, and group work to complete a writing assignment.
- Encourages a real discussion among students in the discussion forum by answering or asking questions, so that the discussion turns into a true conversation.
- Discussion forum for each lesson where students answer some prompt questions.
- An initial discussion forum where students introduce themselves to the class answering questions prompted by the instructor.

**Areas for Improvement:**
- More consistent interaction in the discussion forum where the instructor summarizes or highlights important points would be helpful for students. Did that in the first discussions but keeping that throughout the course would be great.
### Principle 3: Good practice encourages active learning

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

**Examples of evidence to look for:**

- Student activities that involve one or more of the following²:
  - 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/framewrk.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
  - 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.

**Where to look:**

- Course syllabus
- Instructional materials
- Assignment dropboxes
- e-Portfolios
- Discussion forums

**Resources:**

- Strategies for Creating Engaging Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Environments
- Engagement Activities
- Active Learning
- Active Learning Techniques
- Engaging Activities
- Inquiry-based Learning

### Feedback for the Instructor

**Evidence Found:**

- There are different types of assignments: Writing reports, discussion forums and lab exercises.
- Term project options.

**Strengths:**

- Besides discussion forums, writing assignments and the term project offer opportunities for information gathering, synthesis, and analysis in solving problems.
- Students can choose between four options for their term projects. This allows them to tailor assignments to their personal and professional interests and needs. These term projects are worth 45% of the final grade for the class.

**Areas for Improvement:**

- Consider creating a Reflective Practice activity that allows you to assess which activities from the course are students finding the most useful and which others they find challenging.

² 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
Principle 4: Good practice gives prompt feedback

Instructors help students frequently assess their knowledge and competence and provide them with opportunities to perform, receive meaningful suggestions, and reflect on their learning.

**Examples of evidence to look for:** The instructor...

- Includes information about course feedback methods and standards on the course syllabus.
- Provides an option (or requirement) for students to submit drafts of assignments for instructor feedback.
- Provides meaningful feedback on student assignments that is provided within a publicized, and reasonable, time frame.
- Provides assignment feedback that is clear, positive, specific, and focused on observable behavior that can be changed.
- Clearly communicates course and individual assignment grading criteria.
- Surveys students to elicit feedback for course improvement.
- Praises/acknowledges responses from the class.
- Helps students to extend their responses.
- Asks student teams to read each other’s homework and critique.
- Structures discussions of material based on feedback on students’ understanding.
- Gives students access to an up-to-date course gradebook.
- Provides an open discussion forum where students can ask questions, and receive instructor feedback, about course content and activities.
- Shares examples of student work that demonstrate advancement toward learning goals.
- Provides opportunities for practice with feedback such as interactive self-assessments or narrated demonstrations of how to solve mathematical problems.

**Where to look:**

- Course syllabus
- Instructional materials / Assignment directions
- Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios
- Course gradebook
- Discussion forums
- Survey instruments

**Resources:**

- [Seven Keys to Effective Feedback](#)
- [5 Research-based Tips for Providing Students with Meaningful Feedback](#)

### Feedback for the Instructor

**Evidence Found:**

- Rubrics for discussion forums
- Assignment directions
- Comments and feedback on students’ assignments

**Strengths:**

- Grading rubrics were provided for all discussion forums.
- Students submit five products related to the final project throughout the term (e.g., abstract, outline, draft…). This way, they receive enough feedback before submitting the final version of the project.
- Overall feedback provided was constructive and specific; effort was made to highlight achievements as well as areas to improve; evident that is very thoughtful and encouraging regarding feedback.

**Areas for Improvement:**

- Some activities, such as the exercise will benefit from a grading rubric.
- I didn’t find any feedback on some discussion forum activities. I wonder if the feedback was provided to students during office hours. If so, it would be good to clarify that in Canvas. It would be good to provide some general feedback regarding the content discussed by students in their posts.
- The instructor may want to pin in Canvas the General Q&A discussion forum to bring it to students’ attention and remind students that they have this unique place to ask technical questions while completing assignments that require using particular software and data.
Principle 5: Good education emphasizes time on task

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.

Examples of evidence to look for:
- 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 than this 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 consider 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.

Where to look:
- Course syllabus
- Instructional materials / Assignment directions
- Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios
- Log in and other access data in the LMS

Resources:
- Time Management: Five Essentials for Online Learners
- Adjusting Your Study Habits
- Online Course Design: Time on Task
- iStudy Module (for students) on Time Management
- How Students Develop Online Learning Skills

Feedback for the Instructor

Evidence Found:
- Syllabus provides an updated course schedule and estimate of time students should spend on the class.
- Readings discussions due on Fridays, and other activities are due on Wednesday, so students can better distribute time between activities.

Strengths:
- Final term project is broken up into a submission for each week, helping to keep students ‘on task’.

Areas for Improvement:
- Consider adding time-to-completion for individual assignments.
Principle 6: Good practice communicates high expectations

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.

Examples of evidence to look for:
- Explicit communication of the skills and knowledge every student needs to have 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.

Where to look:
- Course syllabus
- Instructional materials / Assignment directions
- Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios

Resources:
- Maximizing the Student Learning Experience (see section on “Working with Learning Objectives”)
- Resources related to writing clear learning objectives
- Authentic Assessment in Online Education
- Using Rubrics
- Writing Great Assignment Instructions: Tips for Success
- Syllabus Requirements for EMS Blended and Online Courses

Feedback for the Instructor

Evidence Found:
- Detailed feedback left in the text of the assignments.

Strengths:
- Offers examples of all the term project deliverables so that students have a better idea of the work they should complete.
- Instructor leaves detailed feedback for students.

Areas for Improvement:
- While the syllabus provides a list of course learning goals, it is not clear how each assignment works to achieve them. Consider formulating learning objectives and including them in the syllabus in the future.
**Principle 7: Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning**

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 to improve their learning skills.

**Examples of evidence to look for:**
- 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.

**Where to look:**
- Course syllabus
- Instructional materials / Assignment directions
- Assignment dropboxes and e-portfolios
- Discussion forums

**Resources:**
- [Learning effectively by understanding your learning preferences](#)
- [Classroom Assessment Techniques](#)
- [Accessibility and Usability at Penn State](#)
- [Student Disability Resources at Penn State](#)
- [Student Disability Resources - Information for Faculty at Penn State](#)

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**Feedback for the Instructor**

**Evidence Found:**
- Syllabus - Assignments and Grading section
- Syllabus - Course Policies - Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, Counseling and Psychological Services, and Military Personnel sections

**Strengths:**
- Overall, feedback is timely. When grading is delayed, notes this in announcements and provides students with a timeline as to when feedback will be posted.
- Student grades are based on a diversity of assignments: discussion forums participation, lab exercises, writing assignments, a term project, and group activities.
- Syllabus contains sections that detail accommodations for students with disabilities (along with link to important contacts), provide useful links for students in need of counseling or psychological services, and for military personnel (who may require flexibility around submission deadlines)

**Areas for Improvement:**
None