

**Some Best Practices for Teaching Online Courses**, based on prior experience with teaching online courses through MLC and student feedback from various courses.

1. **Length of lessons:** (weekly or every 2 weeks): Just a reminder that in *EDU9502: Designing and Constructing Online Courses*, everyone learned that course material should be "chunked" into small segments within a lesson, and that lessons should normal extend only one or two weeks in length. Students prefer new lessons beginning on the same day of the week throughout the course.
2. **Which day of the week should a lesson begin/end? "Wednesday/Tuesday" or "Sunday/Saturday":** During the fall and spring terms, most students in the graduate program are teaching full-time, which gives them little time to work on their grad course on school days. Therefore, they complete the bulk of their work for a given lesson over the weekend. For this reason they strongly prefer that new lessons **begin on a Wednesday** and **end on a Tuesday** since it places the weekend in the middle of the lesson time period.

However, during the summer term, they prefer that lessons run from the typical Sunday through Saturday (or Monday through Sunday) since they prefer to do the bulk of their work during the week and not on the weekends.

3. **Preparing to teach a course during the 8-week summer term:** When transforming a regular semester long online course (15-16 weeks) and teaching it in the summer term (8 weeks), there is no need to redo or combine any of your lessons. The idea is to simply take each two week period from the fall or spring semester offering and cover the same material in one week in the summer term. For most instructors that means they cover two lessons per week in the summer, often running one lesson from Sunday-Wednesday and the other lesson from Wednesday-Saturday. (Remember, in the summer term most students prefer a Sunday-Saturday "week", as explained earlier.)
4. **Keep all students working through the course at the same pace:** Typically, some students prefer to work ahead while others seem to wait to do things at the last minute. In an online course it is important that students are working on the group aspects of the lesson at the same time. One good method to attempt to satisfy both extremes is to make the "*lesson guide sheet*" document visible to students about a week prior to the start of the new lesson, but don't make the posting or submission areas visible until the official start date of the lesson. If following a "*Wednesday-Tuesday weekly format*", some instructors make the next week's lesson guide sheet available on a Friday evening, so students that want to work ahead can use the weekend to do so, but they can not submit their work until the lesson officially begins on the following Wednesday. (Also, see the sections on *Post due dates...* and *Group discussion forum due dates* below.)
5. **Post due dates to inform and pace student work:** Students appreciate due dates for activities being posted in a variety of ways. Some instructors provide a document listing all of the activities and the due dates at the start of the course. Others provide general dates for lessons in the Moodle heading areas of topical blocks, and specific activity due dates within the instructions for the activity, or in the activity setup in Moodle. Others make use of the Moodle calendar. Many instructors use more than one method. If your lesson is spread across more than a week, it is wise to make some activities due before the end of the lesson so students cannot save everything for the last minute. (Also, see the suggestion below on *Group discussion forum due dates*.)
6. **Group discussion forum due dates:** Set a posting due date for the original contribution to a forum, and then a later posting due date for replies. For example, if a new weekly lesson starts on Wednesday, some instructors set a posting date of Saturday for the initial contribution post to the forum and a final posting due date of replies of Tuesday. This forces all students in a group to make their initial contribution to the forum by the middle of the weekend, which allows those that

want to take care of their reply posting obligations on the second half of the weekend and without having to stay up late into the evening to do so.

7. **Provide a "Student Expectations" document:** Different online instructors have different expectations of students. It is very helpful to your students if you post your expectations of them at the very start of the course. (See the *Graduate Faculty Resources* web page for an example of a "Student Expectations" document.) It is also a good idea to include what students can expect from the instructor!
8. **Use the Moodle Grade Book:** Students are used to seeing grades, and comments, on various activities posted to the grade book in Moodle. The current grade book can accommodate many different methods of grading. However, if you have not used it before, or have not used it for an extended period of time, getting it set up the first time can be confusing. But, Jim Grunwald is always able, willing, and happy to assist you with setting up your grade book and understanding how it works. Simply let him know how you would like grades to be calculated and he will even set up the grade book for you!
9. **Use "Choice" for students to select activities:** The "choice" activity feature in Moodle is very good at allowing (forcing) students to select from a list of possible choices for a given activity so you don't have more than one student selecting the same project or activity in a given lesson. It can also be used to get student feedback (vote) on a particular question.
10. **Use "Groups" for discussion work:** Small groups are often used in discussion forums to greatly cut down the amount of reading and posting that students need to do during the course. At the end of a group activity, it is a good practice to set the group setting to "Visible groups" so all participants will be able to view the discussion that occurred within the other groups. When the change is made, it is a good idea to add to the text in the forum introduction area to read: **Please note:** As of 01/28/10, groups in this forum are now set so you can see the work of the other groups. If you wish to see the posts in the other groups, change your group view by using the "Visible groups" button in the upper-left. Generally, viewing or reading these additional postings should be completely optional.  
  
In Moodle it is easiest to keep the group membership the same throughout the course, but it can be changed from lesson to lesson. If students are members of various groups, students need to exercise additional care so that they post to the correct group for a particular activity. They need to specify the correct group in the upper-left corner of the screen prior to selecting the "Add a new discussion topic" button.  
  
There is not a perfect group size, but groups of 4 seem to have worked best for some instructors in discussion forums. If one person is late in posting, at least each person still has two different people they can make their reply posting to.
11. **Grading group discussion forum work:** It is important that students understand the grading rubric that is being used for group work. A convenient way to assign points is to use the "Sum of ratings" setting in the forum setup, and then assign a certain number of points for the initial post and a certain number of points for each reply post. It is also good to include a general message in the forum introduction area so students understand the rating being used, such as (This forum is worth 10 points. You will receive up to 5 points for your initial post and up to 3 for each reply posting.)
12. **Use "Display a Directory" to allow students to see work produced by others:** If you want to share work produced by class participants with others in the class, the "Display a directory" resource is the best way to accomplish this. Under the *Administration* block (left side panel)

select *Files*. On the *Files* screen, use the *Make a folder* button (bottom left) to create a folder and upload your students' work into the folder.

On the course homepage, create a "*Display a directory*" resource that is set to view the folder that contains the students' work. When students click on the link they will see a link to each file that was uploaded into the folder.

13. **Instructor participation/presence:** It is important to let students know that you are actively reading their work and checking in on the course on a nearly daily basis. This is especially important in discussion forums. A least one instructor makes a post during the week of the first group discussion forum similar to the following:  
**Instructor participation/presence:** Generally I will not actively participate in small-group discussion work. Think of these discussions as they might occur in a regular face-to-face classroom. The instructor walks around the room and listens in on the various groups, but does not necessarily participate in the discussion. If I am asked a specific question in a group discussion, I will always respond. Please realize that I normally check in on the course numerous times each day, 7 days a week. If I am going to be off-line for more than a day or two, such when attending conferences, I will let everyone know ahead of time.
14. **Be consistent in how materials are to be turned in:** Many instructors make use of the assignment activity upload features in Moodle to receive student work and provide comments back to the students. Others will receive work from students as email attachments. There is no one method that needs is best, but it is better to be consistent throughout the course.
15. **Scanned files:** Scanned pages from books should be scanned directly in a PDF (not jpg) format with multiple pages combined together in a single document. This will greatly reduce the overall file size, make the text and/or images clearer, and be much easier for the students to work with. (Feel free to contact Jim Grunwald for assistance.)
16. **Lesson Feedback after each lesson/unit:** Waiting until the end of the course for summative feedback is not as useful as gathering feedback after each lesson. One method to gather feedback throughout the course is to set up an ungraded "journal" activity at the end of each lesson where students are asked to complete 3 statements;
  - 1) The most useful thing in the lesson was...
  - 2) The most challenging part of the lesson was...
  - 3) The lesson could be improved by...Although this is still gathering information after the fact, such feedback can be very useful information for the next time the course is offered and sometimes even useful for making adjustments to future lessons in the current offering of the course.
17. **Install the Office Add-in for Moodle:** The recently developed *Office Add-in for Moodle* (OAM) is an add-in for Microsoft Office (versions 2003 and 2007) that allows teachers to open and save Word, Excel, and PowerPoint documents directly to and from a Moodle website.  
<http://www.educationlabs.com/projects/officeaddinfor Moodle/Pages/default.aspx#>