

It's About Time!

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Time Saving Strategies

How much time does a web course take? Now that the virtual classroom is open 24/7, both students and their instructors have tremendous flexibility and options as to when, where, and how often they access their course. However, where does one draw the line? How much access should online students have to their virtual professors, and how can the design of a course help instructors manage their workloads once they start teaching it? Here are some time saving strategies that will help online instructors and their students to save time online.

Get a Solid Start

Course Orientation

We've found that students who participate in an online orientation prior to the beginning of their course have a much more fulfilling and successful online learning experience. Online instructors in programs without student orientations have reported that they end up conducting an orientation ANYWAY during the first 3 weeks of the course, taking valuable time away from the course content to answer repeated questions about the program and software. An orientation gives your students time to iron out most of their technical problems and get comfortable with the software. At OnlineLearning.net, orientation for students is mandatory - they cannot begin your class without it. Instructors go through an even more intensive orientation when they go through the Online Instructor Training Program. This time spent upfront saves a lot of time later on.

Proficiency in the Technologies You Use

It goes without saying that the more comfortable you are with the programs you need, the quicker you will be at using them. Once you pass the learning curve, you will be much more efficient with your time. Take TIME to get training and to practice using the programs you will need for your course (Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Netscape Composer or others). Look for OLN announcements for training opportunities in our Instructor Community, and consider it an investment in your online teaching skills.

Learn the art of "Cut and Paste"

Compose in a word processor and learn keyboard short cuts. Save your work onto disk. Reuse, recycle, refine -- if you get bumped off-line, you will not lose what you've composed.

Acquire strong Internet Search and Information Evaluation Skills

It will help you navigate the web with more ease and find quality materials more quickly. This is good for both instructors and students.

Technical Support!

OnlineLearning.net provides technical support for both instructors and students. This helps you save time on technical issues relating to the course because you can refer your students directly to your Course Manager or the BlackBoard technical support service.

Course Design Can Save Time...

Modular Structure

A predictable weekly course structure that is easy to follow will help your students stay on track. Break your course into weekly modules each with a similar format for assignments, due dates and activities so your students know what to expect each week. Provide time estimates on the workload expected so students can budget their time accordingly.

Keep a Weekly Schedule

Make a schedule for yourself of when you need to post certain messages and documents in your course

(lectures, weekly feedback about grades, announcements, etc.), and stick to the schedule. Following a schedule will reduce the chance of forgetting to post important information to the class. For example, always post your lecture materials each week on the same day (preferably a day or two before the week officially begins) and always update your BlackBoard gradebook on the same day each week. A predictable structure of the course will also help your students budget their time and stay on track

Communicate Clear Instructions and Expectations

In an online course it is important to articulate your instructions, guidelines, policies and procedures thoroughly since your written communications are what student will use as their guide. Give examples of what you expect. Be specific. This helps to limit time wasted on clarifying instructions later.

Virtual Office Hours

If students need immediate feedback, they should know a day and time where they can expect to find you online. This also reduces the need for you to be always on call. Virtual office hours can easily be set up in the BlackBoard Chat program.

Rules and Limits

Ask your students to limit their discussion forum postings to 1-2 paragraphs. This will encourage them to participate more because they will not be overwhelmed with the amount they are expected to produce. No one likes to read long postings, so shorter postings have a better chance of being read and responded to. This also helps the instructor's reading load. Discourage postings with just, "yes, I agree" or "good idea." It takes time (with a slow modem - lots of time) to open messages in a conferencing program, so make every posting count. Tell your students it they want to say, "I agree" or "good idea," they should clarify that message with more substantial feedback as to "why" - make it worth reading! This will also encourage critical thinking.

Collaborative Learning Opportunities

Online courses are excellent environments for collaborative learning that is more student centered and less instructor centered. Design assignments and activities where students must work together to accomplish the learning goals. This takes some of the time burden off of the instructor. You can use the Student Group Pages in BlackBoard for this purpose. If you set up the groups yourself rather than letting your students self-select, you'll save time as well.

Provide Links to Online Resources

If your course includes assignments where students will need to consult online resources (for example, for article critiques or other), consider providing a list of links in the External Links section of your course. Your students won't waste time surfing (some don't have strong online search skills), and you will start to acquire a collection of feedback on assignments or projects done with a finite number of sites. This makes subsequent feedback quicker the next time you teach the same course. Also, include links to helpful resources for your students like tutorials on the software programs they need, study guides, related resources that will help them with their research projects, etc.

Organize Your Discussion Conferences

Organized discussion forums are real time savers for instructors and students because it helps them to know where to post and where to look for specific information. Create a conference for introductions and other conferences for each week of your course. Name the conferences according to the weeks, assignments, topics or other logical system. Create a conferencing thread about time management where students can offer suggestions on what works for them. (Please refer to the related Tip on Making the Most of Online Discussions for more suggestions).

Coping Strategies

Define Your Time Limits

Let your students know what to expect from you. If you will not respond to email in the evenings or early in the morning or on Sunday - let them know so they can plan accordingly. Let your students know when to expect to receive their graded assignments and feedback from you.

Use Blocks of Time

Set aside blocks of time to work on your course, so you can concentrate on the discussions and the course. Make sure your family and colleagues understand that you are working during these times.

Log in Everyday

... or at least 5 times a week - don't let messages pile up. Messages pile up very fast in an interactive

and discussion oriented course. A little work each day is much easier than hours and hours a few days a week. Also, by posting just one or two messages a day to your class discussion forum will help your students to see that you are visible, and responsive to the course.

Be Highly Organized

Get your course down to a system where it unfolds smoothly. Have everything prepared ahead of time (lectures, discussion questions, assignments, etc.)

Follow a Schedule and Timeline

This will reduce the chance of forgetting to post important information in your course.

Recycle, Refine, Revise

Reuse materials and discussions from past courses you've taught. Work on clearly articulating instructions and other communications, revise the course each time to make it better.

Start the Course Mid-Week

Why start on a Monday? Don't make your heaviest days on the weekend. Mid-week start dates will make lighter weekends for you.

Consider Cable or DSL

Consider the payoffs in time that you will save with faster Internet connections.

Related Resources:

Time Management and Technology

<http://www.unc.edu/cit/tips/tm.html>

Time Saving Strategies and Tips for Instructor Using Online Discussion Forums

<http://www.tact.fse.ulaval.ca/ang/html/timesaver.html>

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Make the Most of Online Discussions

The discussion element of an online course plays a central role in creating a learning environment in which participants feel part of a community and eager to participate and contribute to the course. In fact, the synergy of the discussion can be the single most important learning tool of an online course. Here are some strategies that can help you streamline your time and maximize the effectiveness of your online discussions.

Discussion Forum Organization

Organized discussion forums are real time savers for instructors and students. When students know where to post each assignment and activity, they feel more confidence in the system and participate more. This saves time because everyone knows where to find certain information in the course.

- Forum Names - Name the discussion forums according to the weeks, assignments, topics or other logical system.
- Introductions - Include a forum where students can meet each other and introduce themselves. If all this information is in one area, it will save everyone time - they can go back and review who is in the class. This is helpful during group project periods.
- Space for Socializing - Some instructors call this the Pub, Water Cooler, Student Lounge, Cafe, or other name. It is a place to post messages of interest, but not directly related to the course assignments. This will keep order in the conference, boost the sense of community and help everyone save time by not cluttering up the other course forums with unnecessary messages. Here, students can ask questions about the course and get help from the instructor and /or peers which can save the instructor time in explaining the same tasks again and again.
- Time Management - Create a conferencing thread in your Water Cooler forum about time

management where students can offer suggestions on what works for them.

- Instructor Forum - A separate forum for students' questions about the course or assignments that can be answered publicly, again saving the instructor time in explaining the same tasks again and again. This can also be a function of the Water Cooler forum for smaller classes.
 - Private Group Space - BlackBoard provides use of Student Group pages so students can collaborate on group projects online.
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Managing Discussions

Managing Discussions - having a plan and sticking to it will help you save time and maximize your effectiveness in online discussions:

- Be Visible - Log in every day (or at least 4-5 times a week) and post 1 or 2 messages in public forums per day. That way students will know you are logging in and reading. Make your presence felt.
 - Let your students know your feedback schedule - and stick to it. It's OK not to have immediate response times as long as your students know what to expect.
 - Give timely feedback, but not too fast - allow time for students to give feedback to their peers. If you respond too fast, you will stifle the discussions and students will think, "why should I respond? If I just wait a bit, the teacher will answer for me." Also, students' feedback may reduce the amount you have to give.
 - Answer Technical help questions immediately - usually by referring your students to their Course Manager or BlackBoard Technical Support.
 - Save a feedback file and recycle your responses - Reuse the same discussion questions each time you teach your course, but customize the responses so they don't seem canned.
 - Give group comprehensive feedback - "Mary, Mark and Patricia made interesting points..." One posting will suffice for 2-3 people and you can tie threads together and relate topic to one another.
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Policies and Procedures

Message Length

Ask your students to limit their messages in the discussion forum to 1-2 paragraphs. This will encourage them to participate more because they will not be overwhelmed with the amount they are expected to produce. No one likes to read long postings and shorter postings have a better chance of being read and responded to. This also helps the instructor's reading load.

Make Each Message Count

Discourage postings saying just, "yes, I agree" or "good idea." It takes time (with a slow modem - lots of time) to open messages in a conferencing program. Make every posting count - tell your students if they want to say, "I agree" or "good idea," to clarify that message with more substantial feedback as to "why" - make it worth reading! This will also encourage critical thinking.

Log in everyday, or as often as possible

This advice is both for instructors and students. Messages pile up very fast in an interactive and discussion oriented course. A little work each day is much easier than hours and hours a few days a week.

Related Resources

Time Saving Strategies and Tips for Instructor Using Online Discussion Forums

<http://www.tact.fse.ulaval.ca/ang/html/timesaver.html>

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Instructor Feedback

There's a Time and a Place for Everything

Now that the virtual classroom is open 24/7, how much access should online students have to their virtual professors? While students need much more support and feedback in the online environment than in a traditional course because the potential threat that they feel alienated is quite high, online instructors certainly don't need to be on call all day long! However, important consideration should be placed on communication and feedback response times so your students aren't left hanging. Some types of correspondence may require quicker feedback than others. Here are some strategies for establishing a clear time frame for responding to students within the different areas of your course.

E-mail

Students and instructors generally consider e-mail to be the fastest way to contact someone, and it is often used to deal with more urgent problems such as technical difficulties or personal emergencies. Students often email their instructors with questions regarding specific aspects of the course, such as a grade received on an assignment or quiz.

Whatever the topic of the e-mail inquiry may be, an instructor should understand that an e-mail indicates that the student is trying to get in touch with him/her as soon as possible. A response given within 24 hours is ideal in this case. Emails regarding technical issues should be dealt with immediately, preferably by referring the student to the Course Manager or to the BlackBoard technical support service so that the student can quickly get the issue solved and start to concentrate again on the course.

Sometimes, an instructor may need time to think about the student's inquiry before responding. In this case, it is best for the instructor to send the student an e-mail acknowledging the question and letting the student know when to expect a response.

Asynchronous Conferencing

Unlike e-mail, asynchronous conferencing is usually conducted in a public forum involving three or more people and is organized around specific course topics. Instructors usually divide the class asynchronous conferencing area into several smaller discussion forums relevant to the weeks, modules, topics, and assignments for the course. For example, an instructor could create four different sub-forums within a weekly forum. Within each sub-forum, students are expected to respond within the discussion threads.

Here is an example of a threaded discussion in BlackBoard's discussion forum from Week Three of the Online Instructor Training course:

- └ [Topic #1 Course Conversion](#)
- └ [Re: Topic #1 Course Conversion](#)
- └ [Re: Topic #1 Course Conversion](#)
- └ [Re: Topic #1 Course Conversion](#)
- └ [Re: Topic #1 Course Convers...](#)
- └ [Topic #2 Online Syllabus](#)
- └ [Re: Topic #2 Online Syllabus](#)
- └ [Topic #3 Integrating Web Resouces](#)
- └ [Lesson Two](#)
- └ [Re: Lesson Two](#)
- └ [Re: Lesson Two](#)

Since students are expected to post messages in the weekly forums and reply to messages posted by their classmates, an asynchronous conferencing board is an interactive and dynamic area of the course. In this case, the instructor should not comment on every student posting in the discussion forum. Much like in face-to-face class discussions, the instructor should let the conversation develop and give students a chance to participate before jumping in with comments/feedback or analysis. If the instructor responds to student postings too soon or too often, it will discourage other students from joining the discussions, since they will think, "why bother, if I just wait a bit, the instructor will provide the answer." An important tip is to let your students know your reason for not responding immediately to their discussion forum postings. If they know you are waiting to hear from them, they will be encouraged to contribute to the discussions and interact with each other.

However, instructors should be highly visible in the asynchronous discussion forum in their course and make their presence felt. This can be done by logging in every day (or at least 4-5 times a week) and posting 1 or 2 messages in public forums per day either as replies to individual messages or a synthesis of several messages providing comprehensive to the class as a group.

As with email, it is essential to answer technical help questions immediately - usually by referring your students to their Course Manager or BlackBoard Technical Support.

Assignments/Exams

Students often say that if they are expected to submit their assignments in a timely fashion and respect the due dates, the instructor should make at least the same effort to return graded assignments within a reasonable time frame as well. However, the appropriate response times for feedback and grades on assignments and exams may vary among instructors and assignment types. In general, it is best to return graded work within a week after it is submitted. When your students submit their work, you should let them know it has been received and when they can expect to have it returned to them with a grade.

The turnaround time for grading assignments could be built into the course design as a general policy. For example, an instructor could state on the syllabus that grades for all assignments and exams will be available one week after the due date or the exam date. Consistent response times for all submissions avoids confusion and sets up clear expectations. Also, when an instructor waits until the due date to grade all assignments, rather than grading them as they come in, he/she is likely to be more consistent with grading criteria. If you wish to set up a different system, for example a two-day turnaround time for assignments and a four-day turnaround time for quizzes and exams, this can also be spelled out in the course policies.

For some types of assignments, feedback that is too quick or immediate can be detrimental to the activity. For example, when students are asked to submit their work publicly to a class level discussion forum in order to get feedback and comments from peers, it is best for the instructor to let several days pass before giving his/her final feedback or a grade for the assignment. If the instructor is too quick to grade the assignments, there will be little or no chance for class discussions to develop. In some cases, it may be appropriate to allow students to resubmit their revised assignment after they have received feedback from their classmates. If this approach is taken, again it is critical that the

instructor explain his/her intentions and rationale for holding off on commenting so students know what is expected of them and what to expect from you.

Grades

A student should never be more than seven days away from their current grade status. Some instructors provide private, weekly updates to EACH participant on their grade status in the form of a short message praising a student on his/her contributions to the class discussions (or encouraging him/her to contribute more), a list of assignments received to date as well as those still outstanding, and a general overall course evaluation up to that point. This serves to keep the student on track, lets him/her know that their efforts have not gone unnoticed, and offers an opportunity to resubmit any misdirected assignments. Finally, BlackBoard's electronic grade book is a very convenient tool to keep track of your students assignments and allows students to check their grades automatically through their course site. If you use the BlackBoard gradebook, you should try to update your students grades on a weekly basis.

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