## Table of Contents

**Overview** ................................................................................................. 4  
**Introduction** ............................................................................................... 4  
**Audience** .................................................................................................... 4  
**Objectives** .................................................................................................. 4  
What do we mean by best practices? ............................................................... 4  

**Introduction to Online Learning** ............................................................... 5  
What is Online Learning? ................................................................................ 5  
Who is the typical online learner? ................................................................. 5  
What is important to adult online learners? ................................................ 5  
Teaching Online .............................................................................................. 5  
   What makes teaching online different than teaching in the traditional face-to-face classroom? ................................................................. 5  
   What qualities make for an effective online instructor? ............................ 6  
   Keys to effective online delivery .............................................................. 6  

**Developing Online, Hybrid, or Blended Courses** .................................. 7  
Types of Courses at Northeastern University Online ...................................... 7  
   What are the differences? ........................................................................ 7  
       Online .................................................................................................. 7  
       Hybrid ................................................................................................. 7  
       Blended ............................................................................................... 7  
   Establishing a common work routine ....................................................... 9  
   Hybrid and blended course templates .................................................... 10  
   Key Recommendations for Online Course Development ...................... 11  

**Standards & Best Practices for Online Courses** .................................... 12  
Mission Statement for Northeastern University Online ................................ 12  
   Evidence-Based, Research-Supported Online Teaching and Learning .... 12  
      Getting started .................................................................................. 13  
      Using the Northeastern University Online course template ............. 13  
   Developing Your Course ......................................................................... 14  
   Creating Your Course Outcomes and Lesson Learning Objectives ....... 15  
      Course outcomes ............................................................................ 15  
      Learning objectives ........................................................................ 15  
   Lecture Materials ..................................................................................... 17  
   Recommendations for presenting lectures in online courses: ............... 17  
      Deliver concise lectures ................................................................ 17  
      Use multimedia in intentional ways .................................................. 17  
      Develop lectures that are accessible to students with a range of abilities ............................................................................... 18  
      Follow basic principles of good presentation design ....................... 19  
   Organizing Your Course Content ........................................................... 20  
   Interaction/Collaboration in Your Course ............................................... 21  
      Creating an online learning community ............................................ 21  
      Working in groups .......................................................................... 22  
      Using discussion forums ................................................................ 22  
      Using collaboration tools effectively ............................................... 23  
      Communicate your expectations ...................................................... 23  
      Provide context ............................................................................... 23  
      Participate ........................................................................................ 23  

Teaching Online: The Northeastern University Online Best Practices Guide 2
Overview

Introduction

The Northeastern University Online Best Practices Guide is the primary resource for Northeastern University (NU) Online faculty & staff for quality assurance and the tools and resources needed for the design and delivery of compliant and effective course materials. The information provided in this guide is intended to help design and develop teaching and learning materials for online courses and programs according to Northeastern University Online’s best practices model. Contact your instructional designer if you have additional questions.

Audience

The intended audience for this guide is full-time and adjunct faculty who are teaching courses in an online, hybrid, or blended format, but also includes:

- Instructional designers
- Editors
- Program managers
- Anyone else interested in applying the best practices and standards expected for an Northeastern University Online course

Objectives

This guide:

- Identifies clear guidelines for faculty and instructional designers to follow when designing, developing, and delivering online, hybrid, or blended courses.
- Describes best practices and standards for creating online courses.

What do we mean by best practices?

The term best practices, in the case of online learning, refers to strategies that are based on current evidence-based research providing effective course design and delivery and learning and teaching strategies.
Introduction to Online Learning

What Is Online Learning?

At Northeastern University Online, online learning, or distance learning, refers to the use of the Internet to deliver educational solutions to students remotely. It removes the limitations of time and location to deliver education to students anywhere and at any time.

Who is the typical online learner?

The typical online learner at Northeastern University Online is a working adult who needs the flexibility to access the course at a time of day that is convenient for him or her. This type of student is learning online because his or her job, family commitments, or geographic location makes it difficult to complete a degree in a traditional face-to-face classroom.

What is important to adult online learners?

Adult learners often bring their own life experiences, professional knowledge, or previous education and training to an online learning environment. They are interested in learning experiences that are relevant or applicable to their career or self-development (Tyler-Smith, 2006), and tend to learn most when they are participating in activities that draw upon their prior knowledge and experience (Merrill, 2002).

Adult online learners have a different set of expectations than traditional students who attend school full-time. Since they are accessing the course asynchronously, they need a structured and consistent workflow that enables them to navigate each course easily and comfortably. For many, being part of a learning community enhances individual learning by fostering shared goals and helping students feel connected to one another (Palloff and Pratt, 2011).

Teaching Online

What makes teaching online different than teaching in the traditional face-to-face classroom?

The same instructional strategy that you would employ when teaching face to face also applies when planning your online course: setting the goals of the course, creating objectives, and creating relevant assignments and assessments (Ko & Rossen, 2010).
The online classroom is an asynchronous environment in which instructors are communicating with students primarily by e-mail, instant messenger, and via discussion forums. The pace of the course differs from the face-to-face classroom in that students and instructors can access the materials and participate in the course 24/7.

What qualities make for an effective online instructor?

Knowledge: The instructor should understand the needs and expectations of adult online learners and provide engaging learning activities that keep the students motivated and participating. He or she should have knowledge of the technology needed to facilitate the course, so that students can rely on prompt and efficient delivery of course content.

Clear expectations: She or he should have a clear sense of what students should know or be able to do as a result of their engagement with the course and should develop educational activities and assessments that allow students to develop and demonstrate those capacities.

Presence: An online instructor should establish a presence in the course. Post introductory remarks in the discussion board that demonstrate your enthusiasm for the course subject and teaching the class. Facilitate online discussion by posting an icebreaker discussion thread in which you tell students a little about yourself and have them respond with their own introductions.

Keys to effective online delivery

At Northeastern University Online, we focus on three key ingredients for successful and effective online education:

Preparation: Online courses must be ready for student use by the start of a course’s term. You should adhere to the 2 X 2 rule which requires that at least two weeks of your course materials must be ready for our review two weeks before your course starts.

Participation: Participate regularly in the course by providing feedback and guidance to the class. Providing routine instructor perspectives, engaging students by regularly monitoring and participating in discussions, holding optional synchronous sessions, and checking in with groups or individual students as needed are all ways to actively participate.

Communication: Respond in a timely manner to student questions and concerns through forums, private e-mails, announcements, virtual office hours, or Web conferences. For instance, you should respond to all significant student questions or requests within 24 to 48 hours in a Northeastern University Online course.
Developing Online, Hybrid, or Blended Courses

Types of Courses at Northeastern University Online

Northeastern University Online delivers three course formats:

- Online
- Hybrid
- Blended

What are the differences?

**Online**

An online course is an asynchronous, instructor-led course in which the students can complete the course work within a given week from anywhere at any time. The asynchronous format offers flexibility for students to work at their own pace in completing the weekly assignments by the assigned due date. Each lesson contains the same weekly workload that you would find in the face-to-face classroom. Typically, online courses are 6, 8, or 12 weeks long.

**Hybrid**

A hybrid course alternates between classroom and online sessions each week of the term. Classes meet in a face-to-face classroom one week and then online the following week.

Hybrids follow the same general principles as fully online courses during the weeks the class is conducted online. Instructors use Blackboard to deliver course materials, including lectures, assignments, and discussions, and to facilitate the course in the same way it would be facilitated online.

Typically, a hybrid course is 12 weeks long in duration.

**Blended**

A blended course combines weekly classroom and online work in the same week and is an intensive format, completing a term’s worth of content in 6 weeks. Blended courses usually have a weekly face-to-face meeting with components delivered online each week.
Figure 1 shows a comparison of the online, blended, and hybrid course formats.

**COURSE TYPE COMPARISON**

* Contact Hours: Equate to work that would normally be done in an on-ground classroom (lectures, presentations, quizzes, discussions, etc.). Work normally done outside of an on-ground class (homework reading, exercises, research, etc.) are not included in contact hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact Hours*</th>
<th>HYBRID</th>
<th>ONLINE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (6 hours/wk)</strong></td>
<td>24 (4 hours/wk for 6 weeks)</td>
<td>24 (2 hours/wk for 12 weeks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schedule Format</strong></td>
<td>1 meeting on-ground each week (2 hrs. 10 mins.)</td>
<td>Alternating weeks meet: &gt; on ground one week &gt; online the following week (2 contact hours/ wk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lecture/ Faculty Perspective</strong></td>
<td>Could take place on-ground or online</td>
<td>Online during online weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clearly state in Blackboard where lecture takes place (online/on-ground)</td>
<td>On-ground weeks’ lectures could also be available on Blackboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Material</strong></td>
<td>Both on-ground and online</td>
<td>Both on-ground and online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All material also available online</td>
<td>All material also available online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion (Board)</strong></td>
<td>Both on-ground &amp; online</td>
<td>Online during online weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On-ground discussion can be continued in online discussion board</td>
<td>On-ground discussion can be continued in online discussion board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gradebook</strong></td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students always know their grades &amp; standing in class</td>
<td>Students always know their grades &amp; standing in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignments &amp; E-Assignments</strong></td>
<td>Both on-ground &amp; online</td>
<td>Both on-ground &amp; online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Comparison of Online/Hybrid/Blended Course Formats
Establishing a common work routine

Regardless of whether it’s an online, hybrid, or blended course, establishing a common weekly work routine based on the intended outcomes of the course is important. Student learning is enhanced when outcomes are clearly identified and there is a clear and tangible path to completing them in the course materials.

Northeastern University Online uses a template-driven course shell to help you easily design and facilitate your online courses. The course template provides a consistent navigational and organizational structure within a Blackboard course site. This structure helps students anticipate the workflow for the course and allows instructors to focus their time and effort on content development and facilitation.

Figure 2 shows an example of the Northeastern University Online course shell in Blackboard.

![Week 1: Name Your Weekly Lesson Topic Here](image)

- **Learning Objectives**
  By the end of the week, you will have the opportunity to:

- **Reading, Listening, and Viewing**
  Open this folder to view this week’s materials.

- **Lecture Material**
  Open this folder to complete this week’s lecture.

- **Discussion Board**
  Post your initial responses to this week’s discussion questions by mid-week.
  For important info about pasting from Microsoft Word or another source into Blackboard, please see: [http://smartipantz.perceptis.com/nea/Content/ShowContent.aspx?id=231](http://smartipantz.perceptis.com/nea/Content/ShowContent.aspx?id=231)

- **Assignments**
  Open this folder to view this week’s assignment(s).

- **What’s Next**
  Next week, we will cover.

Figure 2: Empty Course Shell Example
Hybrid and blended course templates

But what if you are teaching a hybrid or blended course—how does the template work in those formats? A hybrid or blended course includes both online sessions and face-to-face meetings. Use the template to map out your course and specify what activities happen online and face to face for each week of your course. Post course materials for all weeks, regardless of whether you meet online or in person. For example, if you deliver a lecture in class, it is best practice to post those lecture notes in your course for review and retention.

Figure 3 shows an example of how the course materials would be presented for the face-to-face portions of a hybrid or blended course.

Note that clear instructions are given about the expectations for the week—students are expected to complete the readings ahead of time but will participate in the lecture and discussion when they meet face to face.

**Example of Course Materials Page for Face-to-Face Session of Hybrid/Blended Course**

**Learning Objectives**
This week, our class will meet in class on Tuesday, November 22nd at 7 PM.
By the end of this week, you will have the opportunity to:
- Provide a comprehensive definition of compensation.
- Identify the four major policies comprising a compensation system.
- Describe the key steps in formulating a compensation strategy.

**Readings**
Please read Chapters 4, 5 and 6 in your textbook.

**Lecture Materials**
This week’s lecture addresses the topic of Compensation and will be delivered in class on Tuesday, November 22nd.

**Discussion Board**
Our discussion this week will occur in class on Tuesday, November 22nd. Please come prepared with questions about this week’s lecture and readings on compensation.

**Assignments**
This week’s assignment will be handed out in class on Tuesday, November 22nd. I will spend the last ten minutes of class time addressing any questions you may have about the assignment.

**What’s Next?**
Next week we resume our work online with a review the special groups found in many companies and the compensation problems connected to them. In addition we will also review the impact of unionizing on some companies as well as international pay systems issues and answers.

Figure 3: Hybrid/Blended Course Shell Example
Maximize the flexibility of the hybrid or blended format by using the online environment to continue topic exploration beyond the classroom. Use online communication and collaboration tools to extend class discussions and to provide formative feedback on assignments and projects. In this way, you create a cohesive and complete course experience.

Regardless of whether your course is being taught online or in a hybrid or blended format, use the course templates for consistency and to quickly develop your course.

**Key Recommendations for Online Course Development**

Here are some key recommendations for designing and facilitating an effective online course.

- Don’t make all course materials for the entire course available at once. Open up the first two weeks of your course at the start of the term and then open subsequent lessons one week in advance so students don’t move too far ahead.
- Make sure you clearly and precisely specify due dates for assignments for each week in your course. There are a number of ways to do this. You can identify due dates in the course syllabus. Then you can repeat the dates in weekly lessons where the assignments are submitted. Also, you can send timely reminders to students about upcoming due dates in announcements and e-mails.
- Use the course shell so that students know where to find the materials; don’t deviate from the course navigation template without a pedagogical reason.
Standards & Best Practices for Online Courses

Mission Statement for Northeastern University Online

Northeastern University Online is committed to offering the highest quality online learning experience for all students.

The following section describes our recommended best practices for providing effective design and delivery of all Northeastern University Online courses.

Evidence-Based, Research-Supported Online Teaching and Learning

Our instructional design guidelines are supported by evidence-based research on teaching, learning, and design of online courses. Over the past few years, there has been a strong cohort of researchers addressing the viability and effectiveness of online learning. Researchers such as Richard E. Mayer, Ruth Colvin Clark, Richard Clark, and M. David Merrill have examined data through experimental and environmental comparisons as well as observations, interviews, and questionnaires. They have concluded that properly implemented multimedia instruction creates for better understanding, retention, and transference of learning (Clark & Mayer, 2011).

Online education makes use of multimedia opportunities for learning. Today, multimedia has allowed us to capitalize on the nature of the human cognitive system. Multimedia options including graphics, animations, illustrations, and video have opened the door for accessible visual modes of instruction. Multimedia that presents material in words and pictures takes full advantage of the human capacity for processing information. It allows both the verbal and visual channels to work cooperatively throughout the instruction (Mayer, 2009).

Additionally, research on online education indicates that courses designed based on proven practices create online learning communities that allow for a role shift where students can learn from each other and not only from interaction with the instructor (Palloff & Pratt, 2011). Online education requires a pedagogical shift for the instructor from the source of knowledge to more of a facilitator, or mentor (Ally, 2009; Fish & Gill, 2009; Salmon, 2005).
Getting started

How you present materials and structure learning within the online environment directly impacts your students’ overall experience in the course. Northeastern University Online takes a standardized approach to developing and delivering online courses that relies on the following:

- course templates,
- electronic delivery of all graded assignments,
- instructional materials,
- assessments through our learning management system (LMS) Blackboard,
- a weekly work schedule, and
- use of an electronic gradebook.

Using the Northeastern University Online course template

The required course template is embedded in your assigned course site in Blackboard. Figure 4 shows a weekly snapshot of the Northeastern University Online course template.

---

**Learning Objectives**

By the end of the week, you should be able to:

- Identify effective pedagogical approaches for distance education.
- Describe formulas for delivering for scalable, effective distance education.
- Define basic learner types and describe how they apply to distance education.
- Describe proven approaches to support pedagogy with appropriate technology.
- Identify significant research and studies demonstrating the effectiveness of distance education

**Reading, Listening & Viewing**

Open this folder to view this week’s reading(s), audios, and videos.

**Lecture Material**

Open this folder to complete this week’s lecture.

**Discussion Board**

Post your initial responses to this week’s discussion questions by mid-week.

**Assignments**

Open this folder to view this week’s assignment(s).

**What’s Next**

Next week, we will cover:

- Emerging trends in social collaboration for distance education
- Approaches for self-discovery, social collaboration, and educational networking in distance education
- Common tools and applications used for these approaches in distance education

---

Figure 4: Snapshot of a Standard Northeastern University Online Course Week 1 Template
Using this template for your course does not mean you need to change your teaching style. Instead, it ensures that in each week's lesson, you are providing all the materials a student will need to be successful. You can then focus on creating the course content rather than the design process.

**Developing Your Course**

At Northeastern University Online, we use the ADDIE model as a basis for online course development. In this model, one step leads to the next with evaluation taking place continuously throughout the process.

**Analyze** – In this stage, you assess your course goals & objectives and your course content.  
**Design** – This is where you establish the framework for how the learning happens. This includes writing measurable objectives, planning your instructional methodologies, identifying resources, and developing assessments.  
**Develop** – Create your materials based on the course objectives and framework you developed in the analysis and design stages. This includes developing lecture materials, exercises, scripts, and other materials and posting them to Blackboard.  
**Implement** – Implementation is the actual teaching of your course. This is where you present objectives and readings, deliver lectures, engage students in discussions, assess students and provide feedback.  
**Evaluate** – The final stage of the ADDIE model is evaluation. This is where you use student and self-evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the course. Use this feedback to revise your course for the next time you teach.

Figure 5 shows the ADDIE model process.

![Figure 5: The ADDIE Model](image)
Creating Your Course Outcomes and Lesson Learning Objectives

Course outcomes

The outcomes for your course should align with the outcomes for your program; these should be established with your academic programs before you begin development of your course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Outcome:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During this course, students will develop strategies for solving trigonometric equations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the outcomes for your course are identified, you can break them down into lesson objectives for each week of the course. At the lesson level, learning objectives "are related to the outcome of instruction rather than the process of instruction. For example, when a chef adds seasoning to a soup, that is part of the process of cooking. But it isn’t the result of cooking. The soup itself is the outcome or the result of cooking” (Mager, 1997, p. 5). In the course, we want to identify these desired results as performance objectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Objective:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graph all six trig functions and identify their period, amplitude, domain, range, and zeros.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning objectives

The learning objective is a critical building block in the creation of an online course. It provides a foundation on which all the other elements of your course are built. Lectures, discussions, assignments, and assessments are all teaching strategies used to reach the common goal, satisfying and accomplishing the objectives.

Learning objectives communicate what the student will be expected to be able to do at the conclusion of a given week. They are also used to measure whether a student has achieved what has been described by the objective at the end of the lesson.
Robert Mager (1984) states that each learning objective should have three parts:

1. Performance – describes what a learner is expected to be able to do.
2. Conditions – describes the environment under which the performance occurs.
3. Criterion – describes how well the learner must perform for it to be considered acceptable.

In creating your learning objectives, keep in mind that each objective should be **performance-based and measurable**. A performance-based learning objective describes the skill or knowledge that a student will be able to demonstrate by the end of the course or lesson. Use specific action verbs such as: *list, identify, state, discuss, describe, define, solve, compare and contrast.*

Consider the difference in the following two examples:

### Learning Objective A

**At the end of the lesson, students will:**

*Understand how to write an objective.*

*Feedback:* Using a verb like *understand* is too vague. The question we need to ask is: How do we determine if a student actually knows how to write an objective?

### Learning Objective B

**At the end of this course, you will be able to:**

*Write a measurable performance-based learning objective that contains a performance, conditions, and criteria.*

*Feedback:* Here we have an objective that contains all three of Mager's elements.

1. **Performance:** Write a measurable performance-based learning objective.
2. **Condition:** The objective must be measurable.
3. **Criteria:** It must have a performance, condition, and criteria.
As previously stated, learning objectives are your course foundation. Once you have established your learning objectives, your readings, lectures, and assessments should follow accordingly.

For more information on creating more performance-based learning objectives, see the Appendix for the Bloom’s Taxonomy wheel of action verbs and Robert Mager’s book *Preparing of Instructional Objectives*.

**Lecture Materials**

The lecture provides an instructor perspective on the topic covered. You will need to give additional information, examples or demonstrations, and perspectives on course topics. The lecture partnered with course materials will help prepare students to apply learning to assignments where they will demonstrate growing skills and knowledge through performance.

**Recommendations for presenting lectures in online courses:**

**Deliver concise lectures**
Research by Middendorf & Kalish (1996) suggests that the average adult attention span for learning and retention is about 15 to 20 minutes at a time. If you have more lecture content than you can present in 20 minutes, it’s better to break up, or “chunk” the content into separate, shorter segments that students can view and review as often as they need. Use other activities such as the discussion board or peer feedback to explore topics in greater detail. This method emulates a live interactive classroom facilitation style and keeps students involved and interested.

**Use multimedia in intentional ways**
The human mind can only process a certain amount of information at one time before experiencing cognitive overload. Include multimedia (e.g., visuals, audio, animation) as shown in Figure 6 in your lectures only when it supports or enhances learning and comprehension.
Develop lectures that are accessible to students with a range of abilities
Consider the needs and preferences of the students viewing your course materials. Always include multiple versions of a lecture, e.g., include text transcriptions of any audiovisual material and add notes to your PowerPoint lecture (as shown in Figure 7). Students can then choose what type of format works best for their learning style and ability. This also affords flexibility as it enables all students to access the course materials from any location at any time.

When recording your lecture in Camtasia Relay, include captioning. This will serve as not only the narration for your multimedia lecture, but it will also be an additional resource for students with hearing impairments to access the lecture as well as for those for whom text is the best learning option.
Follow basic principles of good presentation design
Create lecture content that is visually appealing and easy to read on screen or in print. If you use PowerPoint, use short bullet points to highlight key ideas or “talking points” but type your longer narrative into the Notes field below the slide. Leave ample white space on the slide and use font sizes and colors that are easy to see both on screen and in print.
The following figure below shows an example of converting a text-based lecture into a multimedia PowerPoint lecture.

![Figure 8: Converting Your Lecture from Text-Based to Multimedia](image)

For more information on lecture capture tools, visit the Northeastern University Online Instructor Resource Center at [http://www.northeastern.edu/nuolirc/](http://www.northeastern.edu/nuolirc/).

**Organizing Your Course Content**

An effective online course is well organized and easy to navigate. Northeastern University Online’s course templates organize course materials into folders containing like content (i.e. readings, lectures, discussions etc.), which keeps the weekly course materials page from getting too crowded. Students should be able to access materials quickly and the page should be free from unnecessary scrolling and clicking. Use folders *only* if there are multiple items you wish the students to view. If there is a single item, post it by itself.

**Chunking**

Breaking text into smaller chunks of information (or “chunking”) improves retention and also provides a more easily readable format. Using bullet points also breaks up large paragraphs of text and is easier to process.
Research suggests that students learn best when presented with information that is broken down into smaller, more easily digestible sections. According to Taylor (2010), “content chunking puts cognitive load theory into practice by helping to diminish students’ cognitive load (i.e., mental burden) as a result of reading content in smaller segments. By contrast, reading an entire syllabus from one continuously long page on a computer monitor/handheld device screen may result in cognitive overload (e.g., excessive mental burden, disorientation).”

**Interaction/Collaboration in Your Course**

In student course evaluations, one of the most frequent comments is whether or not the instructor was “present” throughout the course. For example, how responsive was the instructor to student questions either online or offline? Did he or she clearly explain when assignments or discussion board postings were due? How much feedback did the instructor provide?

Establish your presence within the course. Begin your course with a personal introduction and include some information about yourself and your teaching experiences so that students can get to know you and feel comfortable in sharing their own introductions.

Provide clear expectations as to how often you will communicate (post comments, feedback) and how often you expect your students to do the same. You should also give students an idea of how much time they will be expected to put in each week on assignments, discussions, quizzes, etc. so that they can manage their time accordingly.

**Creating an online learning community**

Whether the course is online or face to face, the basic principles of adult learning remain the same.

Students are engaged when they are part of a *learning community*. Research by Palloff and Pratt (2011) shows that an effective instructor will know how to get this process started, facilitate it effectively, and then remain in the background, acting as a resource and guiding the process.

An effective course contains opportunities for interaction and feedback. Instructors should incorporate different means for online collaboration, such as the use of discussion boards, wikis, blogs, and social media. Interactivity ensures that the course is not merely a self-study course.
**Working in groups**

Another way to encourage collaboration in your online course is to include group activities. Group work can provide another way for students to interact online and be able to develop the same type of working relationship that they would establish in the face-to-face classroom.

Breaking students into smaller groups for projects can be beneficial for both the students and instructors. Students can connect and work with one another and have their voices heard without feeling overwhelmed in a larger class setting, while instructors may find it easier to facilitate the smaller groups.

**Tools for group activities:** Break students into smaller online groups and have each group debate a topic or present a case study. Use the Groups tool in Blackboard to assign your students to a group. Once assigned, each group has their own discussion board to post ideas and resource for file sharing. Students can also communicate with one another via IM or e-mail, but the final project can be presented via wiki.

**Using discussion forums**

Asynchronous discussion and collaboration facilitates course dialogues in which students can participate equally. Many instructors use discussion boards weekly as a means for informally gauging whether students are grasping key concepts and making connections and discoveries that lead to learning. The discussion boards can also be used to encourage and foster a sense of community among students in the course and as a place for students to ask questions, get clarification on assignments, and share resources.

- Include an introductory (ungraded) “icebreaker” post to encourage your students to post some personal information about themselves and what they hope to learn from the course.

- Use the Water Cooler section of the discussion forums as a way to answer your students’ frequently asked questions about things that don’t pertain to the course material (i.e., technical issues, general questions on assignments, etc.).

- Instruct students to post their own comments to your original thread/question, but also to respond to at least one other student’s remarks each week. This ensures student interaction.

- Make your discussion board questions relevant to the week’s learning objectives and assignments.
Using collaboration tools effectively

Northeastern University Online uses a range of both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration tools for online learning. Synchronous tools are Blackboard Instant Messenger (IM) and web conferencing tools for real collaboration such as Wimba Live Classroom, while asynchronous collaboration tools can be in the form of wikis, blogs, or journals.

Communicate your expectations
Clearly define what constitutes a good discussion board or blog post by providing a model or rubric. Northeastern University Online provides a rubric template for discussion board participation that can be found in the Instructor Resource Center under Forms & Templates.

Provide context
Clearly define why students are working collaboratively, instead of individually, on a particular assignment or activity. For example, explain the logistical and pedagogical considerations you took into account when designing the activity so that students understand the potential value of working with others.

Participate
Make your presence known in the discussion board by redirecting, correcting, encouraging, or guiding discussion, as needed. If you do not intend to post frequently, explain that you are following the discussions daily even though you may only post as needed. If you do not plan to comment frequently, provide substantive, summative feedback at the end of each discussion so students can benefit from your feedback and observations.
Using Rubrics

Research suggests that including rubrics in courses enhances instruction. Jonsson and Svingby (2007) surveyed 75 studies relevant to the reliability and effectiveness of rubrics. They concluded that quality rubrics can increase the accuracy of scoring on performance assessments and, when complemented with other integrated assessment tools, improve the reliability of student assessment. Additionally, rubrics can promote learning and improve instruction by making expectations and criteria explicit while also facilitating instructor feedback and student self-assessment practices.

Rubrics create a framework that saves time for the instructor, while providing students structured feedback for graded assignments or exams and helping to maintain communication in the learning environment. Rubric criteria should serve as a direct link to learning objectives and course outcomes. Performances and assigned tasks should be mapped with criteria that can be traced to objectives and outcomes. Student performances can be quantitatively measured and grades are validated.

Options for rubrics:

1. Students and instructors can use the rubric as a working guide provided to the students prior to the assignment, outlining how they will be graded on their work.
2. A rubric can also serve as a final checklist for students, allowing them to reflect and become more self-directed learners.
3. Final rubrics can be viewed as a formative assessment tool for instructors, giving them the opportunity to identify learning gaps and student needs and providing feedback to students based on performance.

We use multiple rubrics to review Northeastern University Online courses for effective design, development, and delivery. See the Discussion Board rubric below for an example on how to ensure your course meets expectations for our students.
Assessments

Creating assessment opportunities

New online instructors often wonder if the lack of physical and social cues makes it more difficult to assess performance and provide constructive feedback to students online. The best way to get to know your students and what type of work they are capable of is through the use of informal and formal assessments throughout your course.

The best practices of effective assessment include timely feedback, frequent opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, variety, and opportunities for revision and reflection.

Use assessments throughout your course to let students demonstrate what they've learned and to get a better sense of whether or not they are grasping the course material.
**Assessment methods**

Any type of assignment can be used as a means of assessing your students, from “formative” assessment—which is given as part of the instructional sequence for the purpose of measuring progress and giving feedback but may or may not be graded—to “summative” assessment—a graded exam or assignment that takes place at the end of an instructional sequence or as the final exam of the course (Ko & Rossen, 2010).

Formative assessment examples include discussion boards, blogs, wikis, self-tests, and exercises. Summative assessments are the exams, written assignments, group work, and other activities that represent a larger portion of the student’s final grade. The summative assessment also requires that the instructor provide feedback to the student.

Remember that it is best practice to align your assessments with your learning objectives. So make sure you keep that in mind during the design phase of your course development. You cannot assess students on anything other than the materials you have built in the lesson. This strategy gives students the opportunity to meet the objectives by providing some real-world problems for them to solve.

The following Assignment and Assessment Tools chart details examples of assignment and assessment tools you can use in your course.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Try it for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Assignments</td>
<td>Secure, consistent, allows for individualized feedback</td>
<td>Collecting papers or ideas topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Required for collecting written work you assess for a grade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnitin Assignment</td>
<td>Secure, consistent, allows for individualized feedback, but also allows for comparison for plagiarism</td>
<td>Papers, checking for plagiarism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tests</td>
<td>18 different question types, scores most automatically, can categorize questions by difficulty</td>
<td>Short informal quizzes, self-tests or more formal graded tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Similar to the test, but completely anonymous</td>
<td>Collecting opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog (web-log)</td>
<td>Online journal – allows for comments and incorporating media like images, videos, etc.</td>
<td>Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki</td>
<td>Group collaboration tool that allows all members to build and edit the material, post comments and allows for other media like images, videos and documents.</td>
<td>Group work, ongoing notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Assignment and Assessment Tools
Facilitating Your Course

Today, online learning often takes a constructivist approach. Constructivism refers to students taking a more active role in their learning by collaborating with peers under the facilitated guidance of the instructor. That is why it is important to understand the difference between instructor-led learning and self-paced learning. Instructor-led learning involves continuous, active participation and feedback from the instructor to build community and promote social interaction. These collaborative experiences create opportunities for students to explore, discover, and construct meaningful learning aligned with your course outcomes.

Keep in mind that students have different learning styles, knowledge bases, backgrounds, and perspectives. These factors combine to create greater potential for collective learning in a constructivist framework. Effective facilitation structures the learning environment so knowledge is easily shared, combined, constructed, and co-constructed.

It is also important to set explicit instructions and guidelines about expectations for participation and communication at the very beginning of the course. You should provide frequent opportunities for students to demonstrate their active engagement with the course and their growing mastery of knowledge and skills. We recommend weighting online participation at 30% to 40% of the final grade.

A successful course experience for both instructors and students requires clear communication of course expectations. Students should know what is expected of them and when they are expected to complete these requirements. For example, students should know exactly how their participation in online discussions contributes to their final grade.
Summary

Best practices for instructors:

• Use the Northeastern University Online standard course shell and PowerPoint lecture template with notes to provide consistency to your course.
• Give clear and detailed instructions on all assignments and provide a structured path through your course so students can focus on learning.
• Make your learning goals for each lesson explicit and ensure assignments and assessments serve these goals.
• Give students the benefit of your knowledge and experience by supplementing readings with real-world examples, analysis, and an emphasis on key points.
• Facilitate learning by providing formative and summative feedback that is timely, supportive, and relevant.
• Provide opportunities for students to utilize their prior knowledge and experience to add relevancy to the new knowledge and skills they are gaining.

What should you do next?

• Familiarize yourself with the training and technology resources you have available to you as an instructor at Northeastern University Online at the Northeastern University Online Instructor Resource Center http://www.northeastern.edu/nuolirc/.
• Contact your instructional designer for a consultation to discuss what tools and trends might help you achieve the outcomes you are looking for in your online course.
Glossary

2 x 2 Rule: Instructors must have two weeks of course materials posted online two weeks before the start date of the course so that instructional designers can review courses for Readiness.

Accessibility: The degree to which a system, object, or location is usable for all people; focuses on ensuring equal information, services, or use for people with disabilities.

ADDIE model: Refers to Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation; the model that Northeastern University Online follows in building our online courses.

Asynchronous: Occurring at different times (e.g., the discussion board is an asynchronous tool as students can post and read threads at any time).

Best practice: In online learning, utilizing strategies based on current evidence-based research for effective course design and delivery.

Best Practices Report: A report sent to instructors from the instructional design team that focuses on the quality of their course design and delivery.

Blackboard: Northeastern University’s learning management system (LMS).

Blackboard IM: Blackboard-based instant messaging tool with embedded roster, audio or video chat, and desktop sharing.

Blended course: Combines weekly classroom and online sessions in the same week in an intensive format, completing a term’s worth of content in six weeks.

Blog: Short for “web log”; a Web site on which a person (or people) can post commentary to which others can respond.

Browser: Software application used to locate, retrieve, and view content on the Internet.

Camtasia Relay: Web-based lecture capture tool that enables instructors to record their computer screen and audio over a narrated presentation; includes captioning.

Chunking: Breaking text or content into smaller, more digestible pieces for better retention and a more easily readable format.
Course outcome: Describes what the student should be able to do by the end of the course.

Course shell: Space on Blackboard (LMS) where course materials are posted and interaction between instructor and students takes place.

Course template: The collection of folders, links, and items within the course shell that provides consistent presentation and navigation across all courses.

Collaboration tools: Software applications designed to help groups work together on projects; examples include Blackboard IM, wikis, Wimba Live Classroom.

Constructivism: Learning theory in which students take a more active role in their learning by collaborating with peers under instructor guidance and facilitation.

Discussion board forum: A sub-element of a discussion board (example, Water Cooler, Week 1 Discussion); forums are then broken into separate threads.

Discussion board thread: A sub-element of a discussion board forum; for example, a specific question on a course topic.

Face-to-face classroom: The traditional on-ground classroom setting.

Facilitation: How an instructor manages the class and interacts within the online classroom.

Formative assessment: A non-graded assessment for the purpose of measuring progress and giving feedback (e.g., journal post).

Hybrid course: Alternates between online and classroom sessions each week of the term.

Instructor Resource Center (IRC): Northeastern University Online Web site that provides instructional design and educational technology information for faculty teaching online, hybrid, or blended courses.


Learning management system (LMS): A software program designed to include a number of integrated instructional functions, including lectures, discussions, assessments; examples of an LMS are Blackboard and Moodle.

Multimedia: A combination of two or more different communication media, such as text, graphics, audio, animation, or video.
**Online course:** An asynchronous, instructor-led course in which the students can complete the course work from anywhere at any time.

**Online learning:** Education in which instruction and content takes place over the Internet.

**PDF (Portable Document Format):** An electronic file format designed to be read by different operating systems.

**Pedagogy:** The art, science, or profession of teaching.

**Performance-based learning objectives:** Describe what the student will be able to do as a result of engaging in a learning activity.

**Podcast:** Digital audio or video file that can be downloaded and played on a computer or mp3 player.

**Prompts:** Suggestions on how to customize and complete a course template section.

**Quality Counts:** A course review by instructional designers (IDs) during the second or third week of a course that focuses on design and delivery; IDs offer feedback and recommendations.

**Readiness check:** A course review performed by the instructional designers (IDs) to ensure that instructors have two weeks of course materials online two weeks before the course start. (There are three Readiness checks- two weeks before the course start date, the Thursday before the course start date, and the morning of the course start date.)

**Readiness Report:** A report the instructional design team provides to program administrators following the Readiness check.

**Rubrics:** Guidelines that describe specific criteria for grading academic papers, projects, or tests.

**Smartpen:** USB pen technology.

**Streaming video:** Fixed-camera lecture capture technology.

**Summative assessment:** A means of assessing student learning based on content standards (e.g., exams).

**Synchronous:** Occurring at the same time; in real-time (e.g., an online chat tool like Blackboard IM).
**Voice thread**: Collaboration space to upload images, documents, or videos.

**Web conferencing**: Real-time communication session used to conduct live meetings, presentations, or training over the Internet (e.g., Wimba Live Classroom).

**Wiki**: Online collaboration space which allows for creating and editing content in Web page format (e.g., Wikipedia).

**Wimba Live Classroom**: Web conferencing tool that allows for voice, video, screen and application sharing, chat, and polls.

**Wimba Podcaster**: Tool that allows an instructor to create weekly podcasts; students can subscribe or download podcasts; can be added to Blackboard course site.

**Wimba Presenter**: Asynchronous presentation tool that allows for Web presentation; can narrate over PowerPoint.

**Wimba Voice Authoring**: One-click recorder that allows an instructor to record for up to 20 minutes and can be added to Blackboard course site.

**Wimba Voice Board**: Threaded discussion board in which students and instructors can record audio and type in responses; can be added to Blackboard course site.


Northeastern University Online. (2012). *Introduction to e-Learning* Instructor Training online course.


