Reflective Online Teaching: Self-Improvement of Online Teaching through Reflection on Effective Online Teaching Aims

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Reflective Online Teaching: 
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You’ve followed a good course design rubric to plan and develop your online course, so you know you are off to a great start! But... how can you *know* that you are also engaged in teaching behaviors that facilitate student learning?

This guide is designed to help you reflect on your own teaching by considering seven specific online teaching aims and brief illustrative scenarios (only two pages each). The teaching aims highlighted in this guide integrate foundational principles of effective teaching with those comprising the Community of Inquiry Framework for online instruction. For more information on these foundations, please see the selected readings list at the end of this guide.

In the illustrative scenarios throughout this guide, you will encounter several instructors who engage in reflective online teaching practice. They each engage in reflection on his or her course using the following essential questions:

- What am I asking my students to do?
- How am I communicating my expectations to my students?
- What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?
- How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?
- Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?
- What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?

You will use similar questions to guide your own reflective self-assessment. You will be prompted to use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching. In the process, you may find this reflection validates your current practices and/or serves to help you identify small areas to explore to address a specific situation or question; alternatively, you might find it leads to ideas you had not considered before in your online teaching practice and inspires you to learn more. The goal of engaging in reflective self-assessment is to ensure that your online teaching efforts facilitate student progress toward your desired outcomes for the course.

Let’s begin!
Teaching Aim: To foster critical, higher-order thinking and challenge taken-for-granted ideas and practices in the discipline.

Description
When we speak of fostering critical, higher-order thinking and challenging taken-for-granted ideas and practices in the discipline, we are aiming for students to engage in specific kinds of questioning. We want them to explore alternative viewpoints and reexamine their own, to evaluate content based on the credibility of its source, to reflect upon the application of theories and practices within the field, to solve problems in real world contexts, and to experiment with new ideas and practices that address specific concerns in innovative ways.

Illustrative Scenario
Gino teaches a political science course that examines the socio-historical underpinnings of current events and exposes elements of innovation as well as elements of socio-historical reproduction. He wants his students to learn to recognize and analyze these elements in order to explain how current events in society today are informed by events of the past. He wants students to critically consider historical accounts as well as their own beliefs and biases as they pull apart key historical influences on current events.

Gino requires students to submit a reading/viewing log in which they respond to targeted questions designed to help them begin articulating concepts from the course readings and videos in preparation for online discussions. In each discussion, students apply the key ideas from their logs to analyze an historical event and its influence on current political events. While the discussion is in progress, Gino reads all of the posts and responds to each student in the forum, correcting misconceptions and validating insightful connections. Some groups of students participate actively in these discussions, questioning one another and building on the ideas of peers. Some groups interact more superficially, agreeing with each other without generating collegial debate or questions.

Gino requires students to submit a term paper in which they analyze and connect three specific current political events to make an argument about the ways in which current events are informed by historical events. He wonders why these end of semester papers lack evidence of the depth of critical thinking and reflection he wants students to demonstrate.

Sample Reflection – Gino’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations

- What am I asking my students to do?

I am asking my students to read and view the materials I provided in the module. I am asking them to answer my guiding questions about that content, then to discuss how those ideas apply to a specific historical event and its media coverage. I am asking them to write a term paper that integrates their learning across the course and presents an explanatory argument of the influence of historical events on current events.
• How am I communicating my expectations to my students?
  My syllabus provides a brief description of the purpose and goal for the reading/viewing log (to prepare for discussion) and for the discussion (to apply the ideas in the content to specific contexts). The reading log is guided by questions I have written to focus students’ attention on the relevant constructs and relationships. The discussion prompt requires my students to think analytically and to articulate their inferences, connecting historical events with current political events. Paper instructions ask students to build on their work in the discussion to provide a coherent explanation of how current events are informed by media portrayal of historical events.

• What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?
  I see varied participation within the discussions. Some posts include connections to others’ perspectives or the module content and promote further conversation through questions or insightful commentary. Some connections to current events lack depth. Some provide descriptions of the concepts in the module content, but don’t relate them to current events. Some express agreement but little else. I also see that the papers rarely include the degree of insight, nuance, and complexity I’d like to see.

• How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?
  I grade the log on a 3 point scale – unsatisfactory (1), satisfactory (2), and exceptional (3) – so that students will know if they are on target. In the discussions, I provide feedback to everyone to reinforce insightful comments and connections my students make, and to correct misconceptions before others learn misinformation from them. I also provide detailed feedback on the analysis and argument of their papers.

• Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?
  I guess I don’t really know. I don’t know if my students read and apply their term paper feedback or not. Perhaps my efforts are better spent ensuring students know how to improve their logs and discussions. Looking back at the discussions, I notice few posts following those in which I correct a misconception. Students tend not to question each other and engage in debate, except for a few of those I have praised. Maybe, my participation is preventing students from exploring critically, taking risks, correcting each other’s mistakes through renegotiation of understandings, and engaging in the kinds of thinking I am trying to promote.

• What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?
  One thing I could adjust now is to provide specific feedback on how to demonstrate critical reading in log entries. Another thing I can do now is shift my participation in discussions toward pointing students to each other to explore divergent views, question, clarify mistaken ideas, and articulate reasoning, instead of clarifying for them. I think I’ll Google “facilitating critical thinking in online discussions” to get more ideas.

If fostering critical, higher-order thinking and challenging taken-for-granted ideas and practices in the discipline is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
Teaching Aim: To ensure students engage with core content in active, meaningful ways.

Description
When we speak of ensuring student engagement with core content in active, meaningful ways, we are aiming for students to go beyond reading, listening, and viewing to think in specific ways about the content and to apply it to realistic experiences. We want them to examine the content for key ideas and connections, to articulate emerging understandings of how the various pieces of content compare and diverge, to use the content to analyze a real world situation, and to apply the content to solve substantive problems in the discipline.

Illustrative Scenario
Annalisa teaches a course on budgeting and accounting principles for non-profit organizations that requires students to describe and apply the nuances of specific procedures and laws as well as the varied factors that go into sound fiscal decision making. She wants her students to learn to record a variety of ledger entries and to explain why these procedures are necessary for non-profit accountability. She wants her students to analyze the public records for a non-profit organization and write a report that analyzes the fiscal data contained within, connecting their findings to course content.

Annalisa begins each module of her course with an extensive quiz based on the readings and video content for the module. Students then gain access to a pre-lecture exercise in which they try to apply the procedures to realistic but fictional ledgers. Once students submit their exercise, they gain access to the lecture videos, practice exercises, and a discussion forum where they discuss essential elements in the content as they relate to a different pre-populated ledger where accounting errors are present and some decisions are called into question. Students are expected to refer to course content to justify their assertions. At the end of the module, Annalisa requires students to submit an accounting ledger using real data she provides from a local non-profit.

Annalisa assesses the students through two large projects. The first is submitted midway through the course, and the second is submitted in lieu of a final exam. Both projects require students to use real data from a non-profit organization to generate the necessary ledger for the organization, then write a report indicating the financial health of the organization citing course content in support of their analysis and accounting decisions. Students tend to explicitly refer to course content more sparingly than Annalisa would like.

Sample Reflection – Annalisa’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations
- What am I asking my students to do?
  I am asking my students to read/view carefully and to test their initial understanding through a quiz and an exercise. I am asking them to follow up by viewing my lecture
videos, completing practice exercises, and discussing the key ideas with each other through the discussion forum. This is an opportunity to correct their misunderstandings and refine their thinking before I ask them to complete a similar assignment individually.

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
  I provide instructions in each module that direct my students to read carefully in order to pass the quiz and complete the exercise. They must use what they have learned to complete the exercise. Discussion expectations are provided in a rubric and include criteria for supporting assertions with information from the module content. The instructions for the assignments and projects are very detailed and include samples.

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  Hmm... I usually see improvement between the first exercise and the assignment at the end of the module. Most students seem to be reading carefully and relying on the content to guide their work, but the projects do not include as much specific explanation of how these essential resources are guiding the work. I really enjoy when students explain their thinking during the discussions and refer to how they applied content to the exercise. It allows me to see that they are using respected field resources appropriately to guide their decisions.

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  My feedback on the exercises includes references to specific course materials to review. I provide a short video where I explain common mistakes on the pre-lecture exercise to the whole class. In the discussion, I ask questions that will keep the conversation going or that will explore someone’s idea more fully; my goal is to promote careful examination of ideas and how they connect to essential content. On the assignments and projects, I offer detailed feedback so they can do better on the next one.

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  Since students improve between the exercise and the assignment at the end of the module, I think I am facilitating their learning by having them apply the content right away to a realistic scenario, then following up with discussion to clarify and solidify their learning before they apply the content again. The only concern for me is why their projects do not include as much explicit connection to content as I want. I really do want students to be cognizant of whose best practices and ideas influence their choices.

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  I can model the kind of explicit connections I want more intentionally. In my videos, I can go beyond the explanation to sharing my thinking as it relates to course resources. In discussions, I can prompt my students to include whose ideas they are drawing from by asking questions. I want to instill the practice of referring to appropriate field based resources when making important fiscal decisions and to do so intentionally.

If ensuring student engagement with core content in active, meaningful ways is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
Teaching Aim: To facilitate interaction between students and build a class community.

Description
When we speak of facilitating interaction between students and building a class community, we are aiming for students to feel they belong and are key contributors to a larger whole. We want students to express themselves freely, to share their thoughts and perspectives, to engage in collegial debate, to find support from peers, to provide assistance to others, and to collaborate in critical learning experiences. This most often takes place in discussions and group work, but can also occur in co-constructive activities like blogs and wikis.

Illustrative Scenario
Peggy is teaching an online course on predictive weather forecasting and disaster prevention that explores a variety of tools for predicting and monitoring weather conditions as well as procedures for mitigating the impact of disastrous conditions and preventing loss of life. She wants her students to learn to interpret data from specialized equipment to predict potentially disastrous turns in weather, and she wants them to learn not only how to respond but also how to prepare for these dangerous situations.

Peggy begins each module with video clips from movies and news broadcasts to show the devastating impacts of specific weather events, including interviews with community managers, first responders, and victims. In most modules, Peggy includes a small group discussion that requires students to analyze data from a specific predictive tool, then generate an initial post predicting the kind and severity of weather event and suggesting at least three strategies for responders. She ensures that students cannot see each other’s forecasts until they have posted their own. Students must explain their reasoning and collaborate with their peers to iron out differences in predictions and approaches to ensure the most accurate forecast and most useful advice emerge. Students then complete similar individual tasks as part of Peggy’s assessment plan for the course.

Peggy has received early feedback on her course from her students and has noticed that a significant number of students have indicated that the discussions aren’t beneficial. Some students have said that they don’t know what to say after the majority of the group seems to support one perspective over another. One student said, “I feel like an outsider with nothing to say, so I stop posting.”

Sample Reflection – Peggy’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations
- What am I asking my students to do?
  I am asking students to analyze data, predict disasters, and offer recommendations to the community response team based on best practices in disaster response. I am asking
the students to negotiate with each other in the discussion forum to hone their forecasts and suggestions much like they will in the field.

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
  
  In the course description, I describe the desired outcomes for interaction and collaboration as well as criteria for success. I direct them to be objective, analytical, and collaborative in the discussion, indicating that it is important for disaster experts to exercise these qualities in the field. I tell them that I am looking for accuracy, sound reasoning, and consensus.

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  
  Student predictions in the discussion forum are often on target, but some groups only talk about how they agree with one another, while others dive into debate of the recommendations for responders. There are several students who seem to interact less than the others, and it does seem to be those who have made a mistake in their forecast or those who hold a minority perspective within the group.

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  
  I don’t usually contribute to the discussions as groups seem to figure out the appropriate forecast together. There is often a vibrant debate on response strategies, and that always seems to manage itself.

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  
  Now that I look at it... I realize that some students post their initial post but little else. The same students do not seem to receive as many responses as others and tend to defer to the perspectives of others instead of debating and discussing their views. This concerns me because they are also those who express divergent but valid views – sometimes noting critical details that others have missed. Hmm... perhaps I should be drawing those students into the discussions in a deliberate way.

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  
  It might be good for me to join the discussion to promote engagement with all viewpoints. Students with divergent ideas often have good insights that should be explored by everyone. Sometimes that divergent view has identified a critical factor that changes everything. If I draw attention to their ideas and prompt consideration of those views, then maybe all students will realize that their contributions are valued and will participate more broadly without feeling like outsiders. I bet there is a lot of research out there on building strong online communities; I’ll do a search in the university library databases this week.

If facilitating interaction between students and building a class community is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
**Teaching Aim:** To guide student learning through frequent feedback, instruction, and ongoing dialog with them.

**Description**
When we speak of guiding student learning through frequent feedback, instruction, and ongoing dialog, we are aiming for students to develop in specific ways, to think differently and to engage in practices that are consistent with those of experts in their field. We want them to use our guidance to examine ideas and relationships, to correct themselves, to make essential connections between key viewpoints, and to adopt common practices within the field. We want them to take risks, examine arguments, and question the ideas and practices of our field.

**Illustrative Scenario**
Aroon facilitates an online course that focuses on the philosophical underpinnings of religion, atheism, and paganism. He wants his students to explore several themes that lead people to these divergent worldviews. Students are expected to study and reflect upon these themes through ethnographic accounts, historical records, and broader cultural studies of the different kinds of communities within which these divergent ways of life coexist and often clash. The goal is to develop a complex explanation of the philosophical themes that drive the evolution and on-going persistence of religion, atheism, and paganism.

Aroon engages his students in cycles of rich discussion and debate, followed by personal reflection throughout the course. Each module focuses on one theme. Aroon provides a variety of resources along with a qualitative data set for students to explore before joining the discussion. Students debate the divergent perspectives represented in the resources through discussion with the entire class including Aroon. Before joining the discussion, students are required to analyze the data set – a set of transcripts from relevant interviews, then submit a preliminary analysis framed by the ideas in the resources provided for the module. Students can rewrite and resubmit their analysis up to three times; each time Aroon provides individual feedback in the form of guiding questions and additional resources where applicable.

Aroon assesses his students’ learning through structured personal reflections in which students are asked to present their final analysis and conceptualization of the theme for the module along with an account of how their analysis and conceptualization changed over the course of the module and at least two questions for on-going consideration. Aroon has noticed that many of these reflections include the complexity he is looking for relative to religion, but lack the same depth and critical consideration of atheism and paganism.

**Sample Reflection – Aroon’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations**
- **What am I asking my students to do?**
  
  *I ask my students to examine data and draw inferences from that data to explain and clarify the ideas in the readings, podcasts, and videos I provide as resources. I ask them*
to engage in deep conversation and argument with me and their peers to problematize and reconcile conflicting perspectives.

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
  *In the syllabus, I provide a teaching statement that identifies the purpose for these learning activities along with the criteria for successful participation and completion. In each module, I reiterate the expectations outlining any specific nuances for the module. I also participate in the discussion and guide students while the discussion is in progress. My feedback on their draft analyses provides further information on how to think about the data in relation to the resources and how to meet expectations successfully.*

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  *My students do a really good job on their reflections relative to religion, but they lack depth and complexity with atheism and paganism. Their reflections tend to be more simplistic and dismissive in those areas.*

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  *Well... I try to guide student thinking by asking questions, fostering reexamination of logic, and promoting deeper thinking about an idea, rather than reinforcing any right/wrong dichotomy.*

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  *My actions seem to promote student learning relative to religion, but not as well relative to atheism and paganism. I wonder why.... Now that I look back at the posts, I realize that student posts focus more on religion than atheism or paganism, and that I am not probing them enough on those topics. I am reacting to their posts, but not responding in a way that ensures that they expand their comments to all three topics.*

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  *While the discussions are active, I can make a conscious effort to ensure that atheism and paganism are talked about as often and as deeply as religion. I can respond to posts with questions that require students to relate their comments to any of the topics that are absent or less developed in their posts. I can probe students to expand on their statements and explain their thinking more fully on atheism and paganism. Or, I could inject a new post that brings together some of the ideas in the conversation and extends them to atheism and paganism for further comment. Next semester, I will definitely remind myself to facilitate the discussions with that in mind.*

If guiding student learning through frequent feedback, instruction, and ongoing dialog is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
**Teaching Aim:** To support students in becoming more independent online learners.

**Description**
When we speak of supporting students in becoming more independent online learners, we are aiming for students to take more responsibility for monitor and manage their learning efforts. We want them to self-assess their progress toward course goals, to complete course work that meets our stated expectations, and to continue to improve their approach to learning. We want them to plan their work effectively, to refer to rubrics to guide their efforts, to seek self-help resources, and to know where/how to ask questions of peers and instructors.

**Illustrative Scenario**
Dwayne is teaching a graduate course focused on early literacy intervention in which his students work with local K-6 students to determine their literacy support needs, design intervention plans, and implement the plans. He wants his students to become proficient with several assessment practices, writing needs assessment reports, and intervention planning. His students will need to match intervention practices learned in previous courses to the specific needs of the K-6 student they will tutor, then carry out those plans appropriately.

Dwayne requires his students to complete several online tutorials and exercises for each of the assessment protocols targeted in the course. They are expected to use tutorials and answer keys provided to ensure they are meeting high standards of proficiency with each protocol. Students also engage in discussions designed to explore fictitious, but realistic, assessment results to determine intervention potentials that would make sense for the student in the scenario. Dwayne also provides a forum for students to share their intervention plans for the students they will tutor and to give/receive peer feedback. Dwayne periodically observes each student during their tutoring sessions and provides a performance review.

Dwayne evaluates his students at the end of the semester by reviewing their portfolios of work with the K-6 student they are tutoring. The portfolio contains the assessments conducted with the student, the needs report, the intervention plan, the tutoring lesson plans, and the post-tutoring assessment and progress report. He notices that some students have consistent errors with implementation and interpretation of the assessment protocols resulting in ineffective intervention plans.

**Sample Reflection – Dwayne’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations**
- What am I asking my students to do?
  
  *I am asking my graduate students to learn new assessment techniques using the materials I have provided. I am asking them to interpret assessment results and discuss implications for intervention in order to practice matching assessment results with*
targeted teaching practices. I am also asking them to work with K-6 students to assess them, then plan and implement effective intervention through one-to-one tutoring.

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
  In the syllabus, I have a section explaining the expectations I hold for students to work independently and bring questions forward as needed. In the assessment practice materials, I provide detailed tutorials and references to guide student learning as well as annotated answer keys to explain the correct results and common mistakes. In the discussions, I guide students to consider points of divergence in the conversation and to critically examine conflicting perspectives on both the fictitious samples and the actual tutoring cases. Post-observation performance reviews help students to reconsider the approaches they use.

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  Most students are performing as expected, but I see that there are several students who don’t seem to become proficient with the assessment tools. They either do not administer the assessment properly or they do not interpret the results accurately. The result is tutoring that does not target the child’s true needs and is therefore ineffective.

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  I guide students through performance feedback and discussion, but I don’t really respond to student work in the assessment practice areas. I expect graduate students to be more independent in their work, to use the resources I provide to correct themselves and continue to hone their skills, and to request additional assistance when needed.

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  Most of my students are very successful, but a few seem to struggle to learn the assessment techniques independently. I have provided detailed instructions, but perhaps some students haven’t developed effective independent learning skills yet.

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  I can monitor student progress with the tutorials on the assessment techniques and reach out to those who seem to be struggling. I can offer guidance to these students in the form of targeted questions that teach them how to engage in self-help practices such as referring to criteria to guide performance, noting patterns in errors, reviewing resources to correct those errors, determining when proficiency has been achieved, and deciding when to ask questions of peers and/or myself when needed. I can be more explicit with my students about expecting them to have questions to post in the Ask-a-Question forum so all can benefit from the responses. Perhaps there are other ideas my colleagues have tried and found useful. I will discuss this realization with them to see what advice they have. Maybe I should join an online faculty community that extends beyond my institution; I might find additional ideas that way.

If supporting students in becoming more independent online learners is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
Teaching Aim: To ensure students understand course expectations and standards for success.

Description
When we speak of ensuring students understand course expectations and standards for success, we are aiming for students to demonstrate an accurate understanding of course expectations. We want them to be prepared to engage in learning activities, to complete assignments and assessments effectively, to interpret grading and feedback as intended, to communicate through the appropriate channels, and to interact with one another in ways that build a strong sense of community.

Illustrative Scenario
Isabella teaches a course on urban planning in which students gather and analyze data on traffic patterns, criminal activity, emergency calls, population density by age, and the size of reservoirs and other shared resources. She wants her students to evaluate and analyze data, identify and prioritize areas for improvement, determine potential solutions and pitfalls, and present the top two priorities for consideration. Her ultimate goal is for students to develop revitalization plans designed to improve nearby urban communities.

Isabella expects students to be prepared for module exercises and discussions in advance of their opening. She makes preparation materials available two days before the module opens, materials such as readings, video tutorials, and related website URLs for national organizations involved with aspects of urban planning. Students should be ready to post their first post in the discussion by Tuesday at midnight. They must respond to 2-3 peers within the next 2–3 days, then manage their own thread (i.e., answer the posts made on their initial post). In addition, Isabella requires students to submit drafts of small assignments during the first week of the module, review feedback provided, then submit a final version that incorporates the feedback by the end of the module.

Isabella’s students submit an urban revitalization plan for a nearby city two weeks before the end of the course, then they create and share short presentations on their plans using a multimedia platform that allows students to comment on each other’s presentations. Most students are doing well in the course, but a few aren’t participating in the discussion as she would like and are not incorporating the feedback into their final assignments as required.

Sample Reflection – Isabella’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations
• What am I asking my students to do?
  I am asking my students to review module materials before the module opens, so they can jump right into the discussion. I expect them to post an initial post, 2-3 replies to peers, and to respond to anyone who posts directly on their initial post. I want them to meet specific deadlines to ensure a good flow to the conversation. The other thing I ask
of them is to incorporate my feedback on their drafts into their final assignment submissions. I expect this to ensure students are better prepared for the final projects and presentations, so I want to see how they are using the feedback to improve.

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
  I have detailed instructions in the learning activities and grading expectations sections of my syllabus. In each module, I remind students to refer to the syllabus for guidance on the module activities.

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  Student revitalization plans and presentations are generally quite well done, but a few seem to be missing the nuance and polish that others have achieved. Those students also seem to be the ones who join the discussion late, contribute incomplete posts, and fail to incorporate feedback into their module level assignments.

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  I grade my students’ work in each module using the rubrics associated with the criteria and expectations I have outlined in the syllabus. They receive a grade and specific feedback through the grade center; I have directed them to review and apply that feedback to their future work.

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  Most seem to be meeting my expectations quite well though, so I don’t think my actions are interfering with learning. Yet, I do not feel as though I am conveying my expectations well enough for everyone. I’ve been very explicit in the syllabus, including detailed rubrics, but I wonder if there is something else I could do to help ensure all of my students understand my expectations as I intend.

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  Perhaps I can have students help each other during the first module by offering feedback on each other’s discussion posts. I could have them rate themselves at the end of the post on each of the three criteria outlined in the rubric, then students who respond can also rate them on the same criteria so students can rethink the areas of discrepancy. In this way, both students giving and receiving feedback can refine their understanding of the expectations. I can jump in with more specific explanations if many seem confused on, and I can contact individuals who continue to struggle through email or by phone. I can do something similar relative to feedback on the short exercises; I can upload a short feedback video to the whole group on common concerns with meeting expectations and how to better meet them while also contacting those with persistent issues directly.

If ensuring students understand course expectations and standards for success is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
Teaching Aim: To create a climate in which all students feel respected and welcomed.

Description
When we speak of creating a climate in which all students feel respected and welcomed, we are aiming for students to interact freely within all areas of the course without censoring themselves. We want them to contribute openly, to respond enthusiastically, to express their perspectives and personalities, to feel valued, and to engage with people who hold worldviews different from their own.

Illustrative Scenario
Dannie teaches an online capstone course that focuses on designing robotic solutions to problems in several industries – manufacturing, medical, and military. It is the last course in the program. Students who take this course are preparing to become generalists in robotic engineering. They must work in teams to identify which problems are good candidates for robotic solutions, generate plans for a small-scale prototype, and defend their plans in terms of overall feasibility, efficiency, and effectiveness for addressing the identified problem.

Dannie’s students engage in three team projects across the course. For each project, Dannie provides each team with a group space in which to work. They begin by coming to consensus on which problem they plan to address, then they design draft plans for a prototype of their proposed robotic solution to the problem. Each plan is shared in a class-wide forum and reviewed by peers from the other teams. Peers are instructed to highlight strengths and weaknesses in each plan by commenting on the plan and marking it up with tools provided in the forum. Dannie interacts as a fellow colleague within the forum providing feedback and asking questions. Finally, each team submits a final plan along with a reflective account of the ways in which Dannie’s feedback and that of their peers influenced the final design.

Dannie assesses the teams at the end of each project. Self and peer evaluations collected after the first project show most students feel they learned a lot, but also that some held back on sharing their perspectives in the teams because others weren’t open to alternative suggestions and spoke strongly against any ideas that contradicted their own.

Sample Reflection – Dannie’s Potential Thoughts and Realizations
- **What am I asking my students to do?**
  *I am asking students to apply learning from across their program in ways that simulate the work they will do in the field. They must work in teams to determine when robotic solutions are warranted and to decide together on the design aspects that will make for the most efficient and effective resolution to the problem. They must also be able to justify the plan and its feasibility.*

- **How am I communicating my expectations to my students?**
The goals for the course are stated clearly on the syllabus and reiterated in the instructions for the course projects. In the icebreaker module, students critique two video examples of the kind of teamwork they should emulate as they work on the projects using the criteria I provide for their self and peer evaluations, then I provide feedback to help them succeed.

- **What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?**
  The teams are submitting good work and the discussions are productive, but some students are reporting that they are holding back in the group spaces and that disturbs me. I want them to participate freely and debate openly because this is what they will need to do on design teams after they graduate.

- **How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?**
  I participate in the discussion as if I am one of their colleagues rather than their instructor. I share my thoughts, ask questions, and bring up resources as they come to mind while reading their posts. I try to encourage students to talk with each other as well as with me by connecting their ideas to those of their peers and prompting further discussion. I don’t participate in the group spaces because I want students to problem-solve together, practicing the behaviors and kinds of communication needed for the group to function well.

- **Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?**
  I think my students are demonstrating their learning about the use of robotics to solve problems and about how to design plans for prototypes, but it seems like I am not adequately ensuring they succeed at adopting effective interpersonal strategies for teamwork.

- **What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?**
  Since we have just begun the second project sequence, I think I will start observing and providing feedback in the group spaces. Having the tutorial activity with feedback in the intro module is a good start, but it might be most helpful if I guide development of the strategies within the group spaces as well. I think I will send an announcement tonight that lets my students know that I have read through their first set of self and peer evaluations and have decided that I can offer some additional feedback in the group spaces to facilitate their progress on group skills. Hopefully, these steps on my part will help all students improve their strategies for interacting within teams.

If creating a climate in which all students feel respected and welcomed is a teaching aim you’d like to explore, you can use the Reflection Guide in the Appendix to engage in focused reflections on your own online teaching.
Realizations from the fictional instructors’ reflections...

✓ Gino realized he can provide specific feedback on assignments and within discussions to guide the development of the critical thinking skills he wants students to demonstrate.
✓ Annalisa realized she can model the kinds of engagement with core resources she wants students to adopt in their professional practice.
✓ Peggy realized she can draw attention to student ideas in the discussions and promote further conversation between students on these perspectives.
✓ Aroon realized he can ensure discussions are balanced and address all aspects of the prompt by asking questions that require further consideration of less developed concepts.
✓ Dwayne realized he can clarify that questions are expected and offer guidance through targeted questions that help students develop essential self-help skills.
✓ Isabella realized she can guide students in rating themselves and each other on how well they are meeting key course criteria, then also provide specific explanations in areas that continue to prove challenging for students.
✓ Dannie realized she can provide feedback in the group spaces to help facilitate development of interpersonal skills for effective group communication.
✓ Learn more by ...
  o searching the internet for resources related to a key word or phrase.
  o searching the research in the university databases.
  o talking to colleagues who teach online.
  o joining an online community of practice.

What might you realize? Start now by copying the Reflection Guide in the Appendix and selecting a teaching aim to explore!
A few readings in support of the teaching aims discussed in this guide...

**Foundational Literature**


**Additional Readings**


**Websites**

- The Community of Inquiry
- Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository
Appendix: Reflection Guide

Which teaching aim do I want to consider today?

Which scenario from my own teaching relates to this teaching aim?

What am I asking my students to do?

How am I communicating my expectations to my students?

What evidence is there that my students are successful, or perhaps struggling?

How do I respond to student participation and attempts to meet course goals?

Do my actions appear to facilitate student learning, or to interfere with it?

What adjustments can I make now, and where can I learn more?