

Guidelines for Formative Peer Observation of Online Courses

A collaboration between Online Teaching and Learning and the Institute for Teaching, Learning and Academic Leadership at the University at Albany-State University of New York, written in 2019 by

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This document is specifically designed to provide guidance and structure for *formative* assessment of online teaching. Formative peer observation is focused on providing feedback to *inform and improve teaching*. This document is *not* designed to guide processes for summative assessment of teaching that would be used to make high-stakes decisions such as promotion or tenure. More information about summative assessment can be found in ITLAL's *A Field Guide to Peer Observation of Teaching*, which provides the basis for many of the ideas and text in this document.

These guidelines are divided into two parts: (1) a step-by-step guide to setting up a formative peer observation process and (2) a guide to deciding which elements of your online course to select for observation based on your teaching aims and principles of best practices.

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Part I. Setting up a Formative Peer Observation Process

An overview of the peer observation process

Peer observation, when done well, provides an opportunity for instructors to reflect on their teaching practice with the help of another set of eyes. This begins with the instructor and the observer working together to develop a plan for observation, which provides focus for the observation and prepares the instructor to consider more deeply how their teaching affects student learning. After the plan is developed, the observer spends focused time exploring elements of the online course. The instructor can also review and explore their online course and teaching with the observation plan in mind. Then, the observer communicates their findings to the instructor. Together the instructor and the observer will interpret these findings to help the instructor learn more about how their online course is working and inform their teaching moving forward.

Formative assessment as a shared process

Peer observation to provide formative feedback is best conceived of as an instructor-led process that focuses on areas the instructor wishes to examine in their teaching practice. Instructors may approach peer observation of their course with different purposes in mind. Some instructors have a clear sense of what is and is not working well in their online course and want feedback on specific concerns. Others may only begin to identify concerns after they describe their course to a peer observer. And some instructors may simply ask a peer observer to give “general impressions” about what they are doing well and what they could improve. Similarly, the peer observer will approach this process with varying levels of experience: they may have little experience with online teaching, they may be experienced teachers of online courses, or they may have varying degrees of experience teaching face-to-face courses.

Because instructors and observers have different experiences and concerns, it is helpful to have a structure to create focus for the observation. The guidelines that follow this introduction are designed to support instructors and observers in sharing the responsibility of formative peer observation in the following ways:

- by providing a clear picture of the steps in the peer observation process.
- by suggesting questions that will facilitate the conversations that are the central feature of these steps.
- by suggesting possible areas of focus to guide observations.
- by suggesting strategies for observing the teaching of the online course.

The formative peer observation process step-by-step

Step 1: Preparing for the pre-observation meeting between the instructor and the peer observer

Purpose: When we want to reflect on and improve teaching, we need to know the context for the teaching and the aims of that teaching; without context and a sense of the aims of the teaching, we really can't gather and provide feedback on it.

Suggestions: Both the instructor and the peer observer have preparatory work to do before they meet. Be sure to structure time into the schedules of both instructor and observer so that this important work can take place.

For the instructor:

If you have the ability to select your peer observer, select an observer with whom you feel comfortable sharing and examining your online course and teaching. Even if you can't choose your observer, you do have control over how you share and examine your online course and teaching together.

One key aspect of the shared experience of peer observation is providing context. One important part of providing context will be to share relevant course materials with the observer. These materials include the course syllabus, assignments and assessments, grading rubrics, etc. In addition to sharing course materials, which help articulate *how* you teach, it is useful to spend some time reflecting on your teaching values and practices, which can help you examine and articulate *why* you teach the way you do. This reflection should focus on three key questions:

- How do you want your students to change as a result of your teaching? (goals)
- What kind of teaching do you think is most effective to facilitate these changes in students? (teaching beliefs and values)
- Which specific teaching decisions (kinds of activities, kinds of content, kinds of technology) have you made to teach in these ways? (teaching practices)

Once you have articulated your goals for your students, it is important to make sure that the strategies and techniques you have chosen clearly reflect those goals. When communicated to your observer, this connection creates the context for understanding your choices as a teacher, which is necessary if the feedback you receive is to be relevant. If, for example, you want to encourage productive disagreement and debate between students, the observation by a peer that you did not adequately control the focus of an online discussion or present enough information in an online lecture may not help you become more effective. What you need is for the observer to recommend to you ways to provoke or encourage the diverse ideas you wanted students to articulate.

As you think about your teaching beliefs and values in relation to your teaching choices, it will help you to consider how the teaching strategies and techniques you are using align with your sense of what the most effective teaching is. In some cases, you may discover that your teaching practices don't fully align with your core teaching values. These might be important places to investigate and ultimately change. For example, if you want students to become critical readers of research and you believe that effectively teaching this skill requires the instructor to scaffold that process for them to practice, you may note with some interest if you tend to provide lectures and models of critical reading for students but don't actually provide many practice opportunities for them.

After this process of reflection, you may find it helpful to write down responses to the following, more focused, questions.

- How does this course reflect your teaching aims, your teaching beliefs, and your teaching decisions?

- For each of the learning goals you list in your course syllabus, identify the assessment that addresses it, and opportunities for students to practice the required thinking prior to the assessment. Are your goals, assessment, and practice opportunities aligned?
- What do you want to learn from this observation?
 - What do you think is going well in the course? Where in the course do you see these successes?
 - Are there particular places in the course that you see that students are struggling? Where in the course do you see these struggles?
- Given your answers to the questions above, identify a limited part of the course to receive feedback on. This could be a week or two of the course, a cycle or two of practice and feedback interactions, a discussion that continues throughout a substantial part of the course, or another series of learning activities that would help the observer focus their observation productively.

For the observer:

Before you conduct an observation of a colleague’s teaching, it is important for you to spend some time reflecting on your own teaching beliefs and practices. What you know about teaching can help you reflect on the instructor’s work, but your own thinking about teaching and teaching in the online environment might color what you see or interfere with your ability to observe the course with objectivity. When you meet with the instructor, you will be asking questions to understand the context of the observation; if you have identified how you conceptualize teaching ahead of time, you will be able to set aside your own ideas to listen to the beliefs, goals, and practices of the instructor as the real context of the peer observation.

After this initial self-reflection, you should prepare as thoroughly as possible for the pre-observation meeting by reviewing relevant course materials provided by the instructor (e.g. course syllabus, assignments and assessments, grading rubrics, etc.). (Note that you may request these materials if the instructor has not provided them.) Reviewing these materials before the pre-observation meeting will provide context for your conversation, and it is also helpful to review these documents off-line before you step into the online environment. Reading the course materials should help you get a clear picture of how the instructor wants students to change as a result of the course and the assignments, or it may, in some cases, raise questions that will require the instructor’s clarification when you meet. You may also note if there is a reasoned alignment between goals and assignments and if students have many practice opportunities before assessments are due. Try to get a sense of the rhythm of the course and of the kinds of interactions students will have with one another, with the course content, and with the instructor.

Step 2: Conducting a pre-observation meeting between the instructor and the peer observer

Purpose: This meeting should bring the instructor and the peer observer to agreement on the aims that the instructor has and the ways in which the course and the teaching align with those aims. With this shared understanding, the instructor and peer observer should plan what will be observed in the online course and why. Because an online course is a virtual space that is potentially very large and filled with many kinds of documents, media, and interactions, the conversation should also determine a focus on some segment of the online course for observation.

Suggestions: While there is no one way to conduct this meeting, it is most helpful if the conversation begins with a broad focus on teaching and moves toward a more narrow focus on the specific course. This helps ensure that when particular aspects of online teaching or the course arise, the discussion is framed within the context of the instructor's teaching beliefs, values, and practices. The observer should take notes during this conversation and make sure that at the end of the conversation there is agreement on the observation plan.

For the instructor:

You have done a great deal of thinking about your course before this meeting, and it is likely that you've homed in on aspects of your course that you would like to examine in greater detail. Bring your focused ideas to this discussion, and expect the observer to ask some specific questions. To ensure that you receive the feedback that will be most helpful to you, you should prepare to facilitate the conversation. Here are three steps that can help you do this:

1. Toward the beginning of the conversation, share your articulations of the relationship between your teaching aims, your teaching beliefs, and your teaching decisions for the course.
2. Share the results of your reflection in terms of what you think you want to explore about your online teaching. Identify the questions or concerns you want to address.
3. Toward the end of the conversation, provide the observer with a tour of your online course, giving a brief overview of the modules or sequences, the rhythm of work across those sequences, and the patterns of interactions during those sequences. It is during this tour that you and your observer will choose a specific segment(s) of the course for observation. The recommendations in Part II of this document should help you and your observer make decisions about which parts of your course will be most appropriate for observation and analysis.

For the observer:

The following list of questions allows you to create a conversation that moves from a broad focus to a narrow focus so that you gather information about context, teacher, teaching, and, finally, the course. You should come away from this conversation with a good sense of the instructor's teaching beliefs, course aims and intentions, and guidance regarding which areas of the course to observe. Use the questions below that seem most useful for you to gain a sense of how the instructor is thinking about their teaching and their course. This conversation will allow you and the instructor to make appropriate choices about the focus of the observation.

Questions to get at the instructor's teaching beliefs and values

- How do you want your students to change as a result of your teaching?
- What kind of teaching do you think is most effective to facilitate these changes in students?
- Which specific teaching decisions (kinds of activities, kinds of content, kinds of technology) have you made to teach in these ways?

Questions to get at the course aims and the course alignment and cohesion

- What are your course goals?
- What are the major assessments/assignments you use to see if students reach those goals?

- What kind of practice opportunities are there for students that allow you to give them feedback on the skills they need to be successful on the major assessments/assignments?

Questions to focus the observation on elements that the instructor is concerned about

- What would you like me to examine in more detail through my observation of your course and teaching?
- What do you think is going well in the course?
- Where are your students struggling?
- In what areas of your course (e.g., a week or two of the course, a cycle or two of practice and feedback interactions, a discussion that continues through a substantial part of the course, or another series of learning activities) should I focus this observation of your teaching?
- In what ways can my observations help you improve or refine your teaching in this course?

Make sure that there is a shared understanding of the plan that emerges. It may be helpful to put the plan in writing in a few lines to pin down the focus of the observation, the purpose of the observation, and the time frame in which the work will be done. Because online teaching is available for observation by both you and the instructor (in a way that face-to-face classroom teaching typically is not), it is advisable that the observation be conducted by both parties. But it is you, the peer observer, who will be able to observe the course and teaching with fresh eyes.

Step 3: Conducting the observation

Purpose: The observation should provide an examination and analysis of the course guided by the questions and concerns of the instructor, with an eye toward noting both instances of effective teaching and areas for development and improvement. During the observation, it is possible that the observer will find aspects of the course and of the instructor's teaching that could be improved in some way. It may be appropriate to note these previously unidentified aspects of the teaching and the course as areas to discuss with the instructor.

Suggestions: Both the peer observer and the instructor should put their observations into some form of notes. While there is no single format these notes should take, it is useful for an observer to begin by describing what they observe and only after they have completed their observation to interpret their findings.

For the both the observer and the instructor:

It is also helpful for at least part of your observation to focus on an already completed series of interactions so that you can assess their value and effectiveness. The most effective analysis will be organized into four stages: mapping the sequence of interactions, analyzing the relationship between interactions, identifying opportunities for deep cognitive work, and identifying cycles of practice and feedback.

Stage 1: Mapping the sequence of interactions: You should get an initial sense of the structure that guides students' interactions with content, with the instructor, and with each other. One way to observe this would be to analyze the series of experiences that students have during the identified segment(s) of the course. For example, do students first view a video, then respond to it in a journal, then contribute to a discussion, then elaborate on

other students' ideas, then do a short reading, then take a short quiz, and finally submit a position paper? It may be helpful to draw out a flow chart of activities on a piece of paper so that you can see the sequence of student work.

Stage 2: Analyzing the relationship between interactions: You should consider how the interactions are related to one another and whether their relatedness is explicit. For example, if students are asked to engage in a sequence of interactions like the one described above (view a video, then respond to it in a journal, then contribute to a discussion, then elaborate on other students' ideas, then do a short reading, then take a short quiz, and finally submit a position paper), is it clear how these interactions build on each other? It may be helpful to examine the flow chart (described above) so that you can see how activities and work build (or don't build) on one another.

Stage 3: Identifying opportunities for deep cognitive work: You should consider the kind of cognitive work required of students in each interaction with content, with the instructor, and with one another as well as how students respond to each other's input and that of the instructor. For example, are students asked to apply disciplinary concepts, to analyze phenomena using disciplinary concepts, or to evaluate disciplinary work? Are questions posed by peers and the instructor within these interactions leading to specific kinds of thinking? Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive complexity is a helpful tool for characterizing and articulating the type of thinking students are required to do (Appendix).

Stage 4: Identifying cycles of feedback and practice: You should consider how the various interactions in which students engage provide them with feedback that is actionable and is then used for a new set of practice attempts. This means that you should ask whether students' engagement in interactions and the feedback they receive is designed to prepare them for the complex thinking required by the most important and complex course assessments and assignments.

After you have described the relevant interactions using the framework above, you are ready to begin interpreting your findings. A useful strategy for interpretation is to consider how these interactions fit into the instructor's broader course goals, goals for student change, and into their beliefs about teaching. This means considering how the interactions are structured to ensure the level of thinking that the work of the course requires and asking if the interactions you observe align with the way that the instructor has contextualized the course.

It is helpful to create a summary that represents what you observed, how you interpret it, and what you want to share at the post-observation meeting. At this point, you should also prepare to use your observations and insights to respond to the questions or concerns identified as the focus of the observation. You should include what you feel is working well, what can be improved, and questions that occurred to you during observation.

Step 4: Preparing for the post-observation meeting between the instructor and the peer observer

Purpose: In order to ensure a meaningful conversation that is productive and useful for the instructor, the observer and the instructor should spend some time processing their observations before they discuss them.

Suggestions: It is a good idea to make some plans for how the conversation will unfold and to have some notes that will help ensure that there is a focus for the meeting. Otherwise, there is a danger that the meeting becomes simply a list of what the observer saw, which will not help the instructor make decisions about next steps in their teaching or the course.

For the instructor: Decide ahead of time what aspects of the observation you will discuss by considering both your initial thinking and any concerns that emerged during the time that you observed the course and your teaching. If you have questions or concerns for the observer, it is important to articulate those questions so you can research answers and solutions. Do you have ideas about how you might address those areas of concern? If so, write down those ideas to share at the post-observation meeting. Don't forget to identify what is working well in the course and be prepared to share that with the peer observer.

For the observer: Decide ahead of time what aspects of the observation you will discuss by considering both the instructor's concerns and other concerns that emerged during the time that you observed the course and teaching. It is helpful to prepare for a focused conversation by determining what 2-3 aspects of the course are working well and what 2-3 concerns or questions should be discussed: more than that and you will likely overwhelm the instructor. Choosing to focus in this way can help you decide what evidence to share that helps you identify in advance one or two ways that the instructor might improve student learning that you feel comfortable suggesting or sharing with the instructor.

Step 5: Conducting a post-observation meeting between the instructor and the peer observer

Purpose: The post-observation meeting is intended first to reach a shared sense of how teaching is working in the online course based on the intended focus and findings of the observation. The ultimate goal is to use the findings of the observation to make plans for next steps in refining and teaching the course. In some cases, the sharing of findings and observations may be a time to explore solutions and action steps for improvement in response to concerns that emerged in the pre-observation meeting or during the observation itself.

Suggestions: It is a good idea to set a positive tone for the meeting and one that empowers the instructor so they can reflect openly and problem solve with optimism. It helps when the instructor feels supported and maintains control over the conversation. This conversation moves from describing what was observed, to the interpretation the observer gives to that observation, and then toward suggestion. It can be useful to structure the conversation in this way:

1. The instructor discusses their observation of what is working well in relation to their aims for the observation.
2. The instructor discusses their observation of what they think is not working well in relation to their aims for the observation.
3. The peer observer discusses things that are working well and that are leading to student learning. The conversation helps uncover how these successful elements are structured and

how students are interacting and thinking at these successful points in the teaching of the course.

4. The peer observer shifts to discussing concerns about things that are not working well (including concerns that the instructor has identified or other important and relevant issues that the observer has noted). The conversation helps uncover how the less successful elements of the course are structured in ways that lead to unproductive student interactions and thinking.
5. Together the instructor and peer observer should agree on a circumscribed set of steps for improvement of teaching. Problems may or may not be resolved at this time. However, creating a plan for improvement should at least include concrete ideas for how the instructor can learn how to address a problem or how to gather resources to make a change in teaching.

Step 6: An optional write-up of the peer observation

Purpose: A confidential write-up of the process of observation and the key discoveries and decisions about how to improve teaching can be an important document. It serves as a helpful record for the instructor that can guide action steps to improve teaching. It can also be part of a teaching or professional portfolio, documenting the ways in which the instructor has engaged peer observation to improve their teaching and to develop professionally.

Suggestions: It is very important to note that the instructor has the final decision about whether the observation will be documented in this way. In a formative peer observation, the findings of the observation are held in confidence between the instructor and the observer unless the instructor consents that these findings can be shared with others.

If you decide that there will be a written record of the observation, the write-up of the formative feedback should include:

- A brief description of the observation process, explaining the steps of the peer observation, the course observed, and the focus of the observation
- The goals that the instructor identified for the peer observation process
- The findings of the observation: a thorough description of what was observed, including what is working well, areas identified for improvement, and the plan for improvement of teaching and professional development

Part II. What should I observe? Making a plan with aims and principles of best practices

When you observe and reflect on your own online teaching, it's best to start by identifying your own aims as a teacher and the learning aims you have for your students. If you know what you aim to do, that's half the battle. Then you may wonder *what* you should observe to see if you and your students are meeting your aims. Reviewing what are regarded as best practices in online teaching can be helpful in a couple of ways. First, these practices can point you to places and structures in an online course that you haven't fully considered as key teaching spaces where you can fulfill your teaching aims. Second, these practices may validate some of the decisions that you've made as a teacher. It's good to keep in mind that the term "best practices" can be misleading: what is best for you and your students will depend on your own teaching goals. To help ensure that your thinking about these practices is guided by what *you* aim to do with *your* teaching, this section describes best practices as seven teaching aims and how you might identify and observe the student and teacher work that support those aims. (These seven teaching aims are based on the principles outlined by Chickering and Gamson (1987) for effective teaching and those comprising the Community of Inquiry Framework (Tolu, 2013) for online instruction.)

For each teaching aim, you will find a) suggestions for the kinds of student work that will help you achieve that teaching aim, b) possible places where you might frame or guide that student work in an online environment, and c) a concrete example of one instructor's teaching aim and a plan to find evidence that they are meeting that aim. These descriptions and examples are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but rather are intended to give you ideas for exploring your online course and teaching and for guiding a colleague to conduct a helpful, focused observation of your course.

1. You want your students to use critical, higher-order thinking and challenge taken-for-granted ideas and practices in the discipline.

When you have these aims, you may require students to:

- analyze authentic or simulated scenarios in the field,
- apply concepts, debate perspectives, evaluate and critique decisions,
- identify and analyze their tacit assumptions, and/or
- create innovative solutions to disciplinary problems.

You might frame or guide this work in your directions for learning activities and assessments through well-designed questions or prompts that students address, in the feedback you provide to the entire class or within group spaces, and through your grading rubrics.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like "I want students to wrestle with their assumptions in light of research in the field, but to what extent are they doing that?" How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the discussion forums from two modules in which students are required to make a prediction before they read the research and then, after reading the research, they are required to respond to each other's naïve predictions, noting how and why their predictions differ from the research; (2) the discussion rubric provided in the syllabus which outlines criteria for how to comment on each other's posts; and (3) an announcement you posted offering guidance when an earlier discussion failed to meet your expectations.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are helping students identify and analyze their tacit assumptions.

2. You want your students to engage with core content in active, meaningful ways.

When you have this aim, you may require students to:

- apply concepts or procedures to solve meaningful disciplinary problems and/or
- use practices of the field to respond to real world situations within the field.

You might frame or guide this work in your directions for learning activities and assessments through well-designed tasks or prompts and in grading rubrics that clearly outline the expectations for students' engagement with disciplinary thinking.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like "I want students to practice disciplinary thinking and using important practices in the field, but to what extent are they doing that?" How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the flow of activity across one module from start to finish which shows how students are asked not only to encounter, but also to make multiple attempts at using, the content to solve problems over the course of the module; (2) the questions on an assessment that requires students to apply core concepts to solve problems; and (3) the directions and rubrics for activities and assessments that explain how students are expected to use disciplinary practices and ways of thinking to respond to real world problems.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are helping students engage with core content in meaningful ways.

3. You want your students to interact with other students and build a class community.

When you have these aims, you may require students to:

- participate in discussion forums that require them to engage in meaningful debates and disagreements about course content,
- collaborate in pairs or teams to solve disciplinary problems,
- participate in discussion forums that require them to ask questions or identify points of confusion, and/or

- introduce themselves and engage in informal discussion with other students.

You might frame or guide this work in your syllabus, in the use of discussion forums that allow for multiple kinds of interactions, and in the directions for collaborative learning activities that promote positive interdependence.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like “I want students to support each other’s progress toward my intended learning outcomes, but to what extent are they doing that?” How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the flow of activity across one module where students work together in multiple contexts to use their understanding of core course concepts; (2) the patterns of interaction in optional discussions forums where students ask questions and provide support for their peers’ work; and (3) the instructions for group activities explaining the role of individual students in their collaboration and offering guidance for students to support their peers in collaborative work.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are helping students interact with each other and build a class community.

4. You want your students to use your frequent feedback to guide their learning and engage in an ongoing dialogue with you about their progress in the course.

When you have these aims, you may require students to:

- use your feedback on their thinking to think more deeply, question ideas, and make connections across different viewpoints,
- use your feedback and additional resources you provide to re-examine and clarify their misconceptions, and/or
- use your feedback to correct mistaken procedures or ways of thinking.

You might frame or guide this work in your syllabus, in your contributions to discussion forums and through your feedback to the whole class on common mistakes on assessments and assignments.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like “I want students to make use of my guidance to deepen their learning and support their progress toward course goals, but to what extent are they doing that?” How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) two of the module exams that contain examples of auto-graded feedback and instructions for how students should use that feedback to guide their next attempts; (2) feedback videos for the whole class that respond to the common mistakes on those two exams with instructions for students' subsequent practice in these areas; and (3) examples of instructions given to students for how they should use feedback they receive on assignments to guide their next attempts.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are providing feedback to students that will help them progress toward the goals of your course.

5. You want your students to become more independent online learners.

When you have this aim, you may require students to:

- reflect on what they're learning and how they're learning it,
- submit draft plans for large projects with multiple deadlines,
- use tutorials to practice discipline-related procedures associated with learning activities, and/or
- locate and use resources to help them navigate the course and technologies within it.

You might frame or guide this work in prompts for reflection assignments, in directions for projects and assignments, and through additional resources that are available to students in the course.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like "I want students to become more successful independent learners, but to what extent are they doing that?" How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the directions for a project due at the end of the course that shows the deadlines for elements of that project across multiple modules of the course; (2) the directions for short reflection papers at the end of each module that show how students are asked to consider what and how they are learning in the course; and (3) the resources module provided for students that includes tutorials on technology and suggestions for time management.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are helping students become more independent learners.

6. You want your students to understand the expectations for their work and the standards for success.

When you have this aim, you may require students to:

- post questions and realizations they have about their preparation to tackle an assignment after having read the description, rubric, and examples of the assignment,
- evaluate their own or each other's attempts using a rubric or specific parts of a rubric, and/or
- use feedback they get from you or from their peers to make a plan to revise or reattempt iterative pieces of an assignment.

You might frame or guide this work in detailed assignment descriptions and rubrics, through your comments on students' plans for preparing for an assignment, through a synthesis of the big ideas that emerged when students used a rubric to give each other feedback on an assignment, or your feedback that points students towards specific aspects of a rubric and aligns to specific course goals.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like "I want students to be aware of and meet my highest standards, but to what extent are they doing that?" How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the directions for an assignment that requires them to read guidance documents and then share concrete strategies they will use to meet the expectations of the assignment as well as concerns that they have about doing so; (2) the directions you give and the kinds of student interaction you find on a discussion forum that requires students to give each other feedback on parts of an assignment using a rubric; and (3) the feedback you give to students that requires them to re-engage with assignment expectations and articulate what specific steps they will take to improve their next attempt.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are helping students understand the expectations for success in the course.

7. You want all students to feel respected and welcomed in your course.

When you have these aims, you may require students to:

- examine the discipline through varied world views, cultural practices, paradigms, or theoretical perspectives,
- share and critically consider alternative viewpoints, discourses, and practices, and/or
- offer feedback on their experiences of the course.

You might frame or guide this work in the directions and criteria for participation in learning activities, in the discussion prompts that encourage the examination of multiple perspectives, through the course description and syllabus, through the posting patterns and instructor comments in the discussion forums, and through feedback surveys that solicit student feedback on the course.

Example aim and observation plan: If this is an aim for you, you might be thinking something like "I want all students to feel respected and welcomed in my course, but to what extent am I ensuring

that they feel this way?” How will you observe your online teaching to answer this question? As you reflect on your teaching relative to this question, consider which actions you take to ensure that students meet this aim, then consider where in the course you take these important actions. This will help you to identify a few key areas to explore that will allow you and an observer to see if students are doing that work and if you have framed and are guiding that work for them effectively. You might decide to explore the following instructional elements in your course:

(1) the directions for discussion forums that set appropriate expectations for civil and inclusive discussion; (2) the discussion forums in the first two modules of the course that demonstrate effective modeling of productive disagreement and civil discourse among all students; and (3) the patterns of posting activity in response to one another’s posts in the two or three forums throughout the course.

By exploring these three aspects of your online teaching, you will be able to reflect more fully on the extent to which you are ensuring that all students feel respected and welcomed in the course.

Note: Be mindful of FERPA as you determine which parts of the course you provide access to. Do not provide access to the grade center, and take steps to protect student confidentiality.

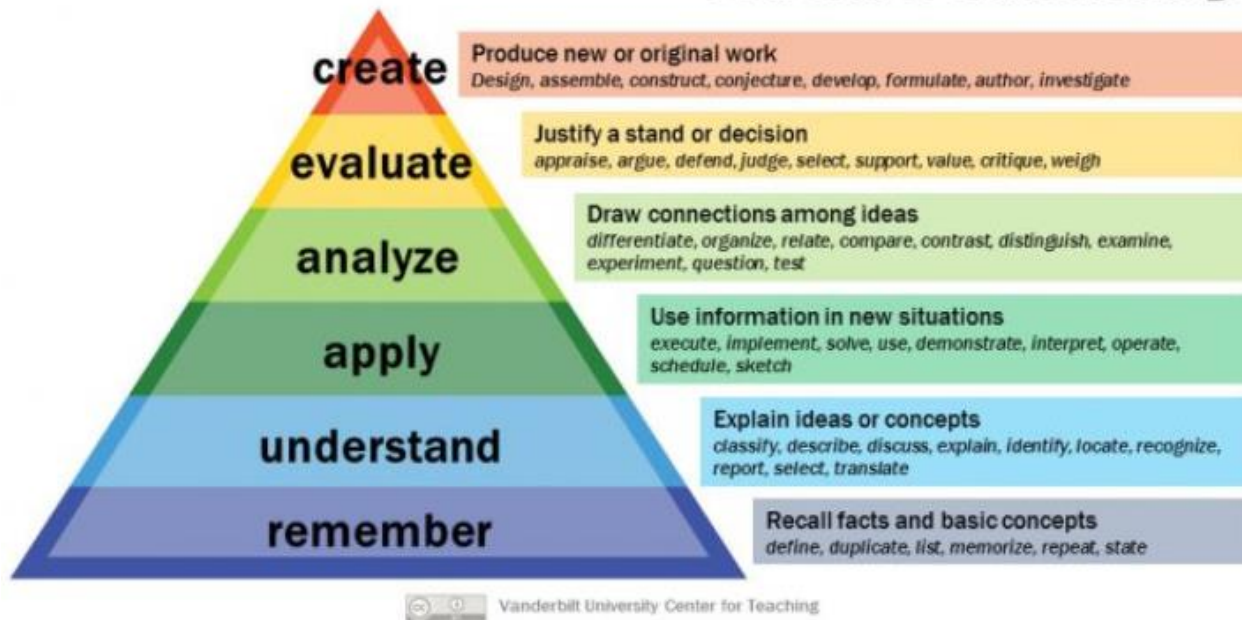
References

- Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987, March). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *American Association for Higher Education Bulletin*, 3-7.
- Tolu, A.T. (2013). Creating effective communities of inquiry in online courses. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 70, 1049-1055.

Appendix: Bloom's Taxonomy

When we are observing students' thinking in online interactions, it is helpful to evaluate the type of thinking students are required to do in the course (and the type of thinking they actually do). Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive complexity (represented in the chart below) can help us find language to describe the kind of thinking students are doing and can also help us think about how the work students do in different areas of the course is aligned.

Bloom's Taxonomy



The curious reader is referred to:

Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's taxonomy: An overview. *Theory into Practice*, 41(4), 212–218. doi:10.1207/s15430421tip4104_2. ISSN 0040-5841.