Chapter 3

Best Practices for Teaching Online: Ten Plus Four

OUR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT best practices in online and blended learning environments continues to grow rapidly. That is the good news. On the other hand, the amount of available knowledge quickly overwhelms anyone teaching in the array of online and blended environments. Where does one begin?

This chapter describes fourteen best teaching and learning practices for online and blended environments. Ten of these best practices, as published in the first edition of this book, were developed to assist faculty who were thrust into online teaching somewhat unexpectedly. Over the years we discovered that we were constantly recommending four additional practices. So now there are ten plus four, depending on your state of readiness and anticipation.

Research and experience suggest that these types of practices contribute to an *effective, efficient*, and *satisfying* teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students. Using these practices can help faculty develop confidence, comfort, and experience in teaching online quickly and easily.

This particular set of best practices originated from a number of sources. We have developed and selected these practices from our experiences working with faculty and colleagues since the early 1990s. Most importantly, these best practices are rooted in the research and educational theories of cognitive and experts such as those discussed in Chapters One and Two. These practices are also rooted in articles by Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), sets of best practices by WCET (Krauth, 1996), and books on moving instruction to the Web (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999, 2004;

Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). Other sets of best practices that affirm and support similar practices are those of the Online Learning Consortium (Swan, 2004; Moore, 2011) and the Quality Matters Rubric, now in its fifth edition (www.qualitymatters.org, 2015).

Many other writers (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, 2006; Swan, 2004; Swan & Ice, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 2007, 2011; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Bain, 2012; Conrad & Donaldson, 2012; Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013; and Miller, Benke, Chaloux, et. al., 2013) have affirmed and recommended similar practices.

Just as the ten core learning principles in Chapter Two are not necessarily "the" best set of core learning principles, this set of practices is not necessarily "the" best set; rather, it captures much of what we now know about effective and efficient teaching online and, in most cases, teaching in any environment. These practices will likely continue to evolve with ongoing research and practice. Instructors who follow these practices increase the probability of an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience for themselves and their students.

We hope you enjoy getting to know and using these best practices as you work to develop and expand your expertise in online and blended learning.

Best Practices for Online and Blended Teaching and Learning

Table 3.1 lists the ten plus four best practices to guide your online teaching experiences. You may want to keep the list handy and prominent as reminders to your design plans and your interactions with your students.

Best Practice 1: Be Present at Your Course

Being present digitally for your course is the most fundamental and most important of all the practices. Your students want to know you as a person and as an expert. They want to know what you think, based on your expertise and experiences. They want to know that you care about them and that you care they are learning. Since they can't always see you in person, they want to see and hear you through your words and audio and video messages.

Liberal use of communication tools such as announcements, unit introductions, discussion forums, feedback, and generally "being there" frequently communicates to learners that you care about their learning, their questions, and their concerns. Liberal use of these tools means that you are present to your students, to do the guiding, mentoring, and challenging that teaching is all about.

TABLE 3.1

Best Practices for Teaching Online

Best Practice	Description
Best practice 1	Be present at the course site.
Best practice 2	Create a supportive online course community.
Best practice 3	Develop a set of explicit expectations for your learners and yourself as to how you will communicate and how much time students should be working on the course each week.
Best practice 4	Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences.
Best practice 5	Use synchronous and asynchronous activities.
Best practice 6	Ask for informal feedback early in the term.
Best practice 7	Prepare discussion posts that invite responses, questions, discussions, and reflections.
Best practice 8	Search out and use content resources that are available in digital format.
Best practice 9	Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning.
Best practice 10	Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course.
Best practice 11	Assess as you go by gathering evidences of learning.
Best practice 12	Rigorously connect content to core concepts and learning outcomes.
Best practice 13	Develop and use a content frame for your course.
Best practice 14	Design experiences to help learners make progress on their novice-to-expert journey.

We have begun to quantify just what it means to be present in digital learning for our learners. The best online faculty—according to students—are faculty who are present in some way, every day. The concept of daily presence may be alarming to you, as it might fuel the widely reported perception that online courses take significantly more time than classroom-based courses. One way to create presence without consuming too much of your time is to focus on group discussion areas and avoid one-to-one e-mails. Time-released announcements that remind learners of due dates and audio containing additional content are other ways to let the learners know you are there while conserving your time. Video/audio mini-lectures made on your smart phones also create positive presence and energy.

Of course, there is the danger that too much faculty presence will stunt the discussion as well as delay the development of learner self-direction. So while you may check in on each course daily to see if there are questions, you should by no means feel that you must add significant daily

comments to the discussion forums each day. Be sure to communicate this philosophy to learners, as they may wait for you to kick off the discussion and lead it.

Students who feel alone and isolated from faculty or other learners are likely to quietly disappear; others who are more engaged may post questions, such as "Is there anybody out there?" Such statements are clear and unambiguous signals that an instructor is not communicating regularly or well.

If a faculty member has a life or career event that requires their full attention away from a course for more than just one day, it is good practice to alert students about this change in schedule and to encourage the students to be particularly alert to helping each other during this time.

Why is presence so important in online or blended environments? When faculty actively interact and engage students in a face-to-face classroom, the class evolves as a group and develops intellectual and personal bonds. This same group or community bonding happens in an online setting if the faculty presence is felt consistently. Regular, thoughtful, daily presence plays a significant role in learner satisfaction with learning experiences.

Three Types of Presence

Research on presence suggests three types of presence: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Here are brief descriptions:

- **Social presence** creates connections with learners based on who we are as three-dimensional persons with families, lives, and favorite ideas, people, and places. Pictures of ourselves and our hobbies and interests convey these many dimensions of ourselves and help to build connections and trust.
- **Teaching presence** guides students' learning experiences. Teaching presence is the sum of all the behaviors faculty use to direct, guide, and design the learning experiences. Teaching presence is conveyed through, first, the design of courses and materials prior to teaching the course, and second, the mentoring, guiding, and directing during the course.
- **Cognitive presence** supports, mentors, and guides students' intellectual growth, ideas, and challenges. Cognitive presence is conveyed by all the interactions with learners that an instructor has to support the development of skills, knowledge, and understanding in his or her students.

Cultivating these three types of presences supports effective learning and the development of a mutually respectful and intellectual community that often lasts well beyond any learning experience.

Research on presence and its framework model, the Community of Inquiry (CoI), was the focus of a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities project. The seminal paper (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) launched an ongoing research agenda that has produced many prominent papers and books (such as Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2004; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Swan & Ice, 2010; Lehman and Conceição, 2010; Shea et al., 2012; and many more).

Best Practice 2: Create a Supportive Online Course Community

Nurturing a learning community as part of a course is almost as important as being present for your learners. We often assume that a learning community in a face-to-face environment develops spontaneously, as students generally have opportunities to get to know one another and develop friendships. In digital environments, more explicit nurturing and planning is required.

Community building has been one focus of research in online learning since its inception (Brown, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Shea, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007, 2011). Some of the research seeks to define a community; other research examines the stages of a community and the faculty and student behaviors that facilitate community building at these different stages.

Building a supportive online community requires using a set of diverse and balanced dialogue patterns. The traditional teaching dialogue is that of faculty to student. But that is gradually changing. Building an online community that supports individual and group learning means designing a course that promotes a high proportion of student-to-student dialogue. The time devoted to the three basic dialogue patterns—faculty to student, student to student, and student to resource—should be about equal in any course design (Newman, 1853; Pelikan, 1992; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). So a good question to ask is, "How do I achieve this type of dialogue balance?" Let's look at some examples.

In online and blended courses, the dialogue of faculty to student is often provided with these types of resources:

- Module introductions and mini-lectures in text, video, or audio podcasts
- Announcements that remind, coach, suggest, inspire
- Explanations and interactions with the students via e-mail, forums, and live classroom events

For example, an instructor might use the following three types of communications for the faculty-to-learner dialogue: short mini-concept introductions, thrice-weekly announcements, and interactions with the student postings. In another course, an instructor might use written mini-lectures, audio and video podcasts, and announcements and discussion postings, with a heavier reliance on audio messages and resources. Whatever communication a faculty uses to direct, support, coach, or mentor learners is part of the teaching presence.

Designing for learner-to-learner dialogue requires other types of communication activities. Numerous books are devoted to providing activity examples, such as those by Barkley, Major and Cross (2014); Conrad and Donaldson (2011, 2012); Bonk & Khoo (2014); and Shank (2011). These authors provide descriptions of collaborative learning techniques that include small teams and groups forming for problem-solving, gaming activities, and collaborative writing. Activities that encourage learner-to-learner engagement are detailed in the tip sections.

A note of caution about the need for flexibility regarding expectations of community: Learning collaboratively with fellow learners in the setting of an online and blended course community will work better for some students than for others. Some students may choose not to participate very actively with other students. Other students enjoy the collaboration, feel that it improves their learning, and find it overcomes some of the isolation that learners feel when they don't gather in real time. The learning theories of Vygotsky and John Seely Brown in particular remind us that the social context of learning strengthens connections and meaning. The learning community is part of what makes this happen, and this should be shared with students to maximize their understanding of the purpose of communities.

Best Practice 3: Develop a Set of Explicit Workload and Communication Expectations for Your Learners and for Yourself

This best practice helps your work-life balance and models good habits for your learners as well. Developing and communicating explicit expectations reduces uncertainty and encourages good time and learning management. Post prominently on your course communication spaces a set of expectations for how often students will communicate and dialogue online and how they should communicate with you. For example, many faculty have a rule that they do not answer content-focused e-mails. This is a good practice because content-focused queries belong in the public spaces of the course site. Queries and responses posted in open course spaces benefit all

the learners, as students see both the questions and the responses. You can also encourage students to answer each other's questions as appropriate. Of course, e-mail remains a good choice for personal and confidential communications.

What about a policy on response time for questions posted on a course site or to e-mail? Institutions have varying policies on this question. Some institutions have a policy that faculty are expected to respond to learners within twenty-four hours during the week. Expectations for responses during the weekend can vary, but as most working professionals work on their online courses during the weekend, faculty should establish a general rule as to weekend windows of opportunity. It is also good practice to plan and do more frequent communications during the first week or two of a course while everyone is getting started, getting materials, and puzzling out access and tool processes.

Another common effective practice is for faculty to schedule virtual office hours, specifying windows when they will be available for text messaging, chat or live classroom, e-mail, or phone. Learners particularly appreciate almost real-time response times when they are likely to be working on an important assignment.

Many faculty often set these "available times" concurrently when they are likely to be reviewing postings or assignments. In the interests of time and community, it is best to use a communication tool where responses and content can be shared with everyone and archived for flexibility in access and review.

The expectation of a twenty-four-hour response time during the week can be modified, provided this policy is communicated to the students and any change is consistent with an institution's policies. It is important to develop your own policies or rules of thumb if the institution does not have them in place. Think about the students as family for the duration of a course or program. Students are very accepting of a faculty member's time and life requirements IF they know what is going on. And students often step in and help each other even more when they know a faculty member is sick, traveling, or engaged in significant professional or family obligations. Often students can agree to monitor course questions posted in the open forum or in the discussion boards, for example.

Teaching and learning experiences in any environment are demanding of both teachers and students, and the time to do the work needs to be scheduled and planned. Being clear as to how much effort and time will be required on a weekly basis keeps surprises to a minimum (Anderson, 2008; Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

How much time should learners be expected to dedicate weekly to an online course? A good rule of thumb is that a fifteen-week online course will generally require an absolute minimum of six productive hours of learning time each week, and an eight-week course a minimum of twelve hours a week. This includes time for activities such as reading and processing content, as well as participating in online discussions. For many learners, it can take ten scheduled hours to achieve six productive hours, due to dealing with interruptions, and focusing on transitioning tasks and challenges, as in "Oh, yes, I need to warm my coffee, feed my children, get laundry started, or find the support materials for the document I was working on.

Best Practice 4: Use a Variety of Large Group, Small Group, and Individual Work Experiences

A learning community has more ways to develop when learners participate in a variety of learning experiences. Many students enjoy the opportunity to brainstorm concepts and work through assignments with one or two or more fellow students, particularly when they don't gather in a physical space very often. At the same time many students really enjoy working and learning independently. Building in options and opportunities for students to work together and individually is a key characteristic of good learning design. Variety gives students ways of tapping into their own varied skills and abilities.

For example, developing skills and knowledge can be more stimulating when students immerse themselves in course content by working through cases and challenging problems and discussing stimulating ideas with fellow students. Teams are particularly effective when students are working on complex case studies or scenarios for the first time. Research (Light, 2004; Bernard et al., 2009; Abrami et al., 2011; Bain, 2012) confirms that talking through problems with others, as in study groups, and other collaborative work, increases learning. In his book *What the Best College Students Do* (2012), Bain noted stories of students who had studied together, quizzing and probing one another, each person taking a turn at teaching the others (p. 246).

Early in a course, students often respond positively to working with just one or two other students. Later in the course, with more complex projects, groups of three or four can work well. Smaller teams generally offer more time for full participation. It is also invigorating to build in whole-class activities such as the live classroom Q&A sessions or events with invited experts.

Here are some starting points for designing learning experiences using different size groups:

- Individual work: Tools such as journals and personal blogs support individual creation, reflection, and review. Combined with small group work, these tools can also support sharing of ideas and innovative and critical thinking. We like the reminder that "Reflection is a form of retrieval practice" (Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014, p. 66).
- Small groups: Working in small groups is particularly recommended when working on problem-solving scenarios and more complex case studies.
- Large groups: The now-ubiquitous mobile and synchronous tools allow us to spontaneously plan large group activities such as expert visits and virtual conferences and do real-time project planning, brainstorming, and presentations.

It is tempting to design one type of weekly learning module and then just create a set of similar modules for the other weeks or units of your course. We believe that this can save time and energy in designing and preparing a course. However, student feedback from personal communications suggests that online courses can quickly become too predictable, consisting of reading, posting on discussion boards, and writing papers. Students share that they begin to suffer from a week-to-week sameness factor, as early as after only two or three weeks. Consider including an activity that is based on student feedback or is student-determined, such as using a discussion question they write, to break up the sameness of course activities.

Best Practice 5: Use Synchronous and Asynchronous Activities

Another way of providing variety in your course design is to balance asynchronous activities with synchronous activities. When online courses were initially offered, they were almost totally asynchronous. In many ways, they represented a new generation of the correspondence distance learning courses so widespread in the middle of the twentieth century (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). Now we have tools supporting entirely new generations of online and blended courses. We have social media tools and the "Internet of things" connecting everyone with everything. We have learning management and course management systems, real-time synchronous classrooms, massive open online courses (MOOCs), spontaneous collaboration tools, and an almost infinite number of web tools, smart phones,

and wearables that support synchronous chat, video messaging, and more. These tools make it possible to do almost everything that we have been accustomed to doing in face-to-face classrooms, and discussions and events can be recorded and archived for later and multiple views. In addition, we can engage learners in more extensive collaborative and reflective activities, from anywhere, at any time we choose to be awake and communicating.

Sometimes there is nothing better than a real-time interactive brainstorming and sharing discussion; other times, the requirement to think, plan, write, and reflect is what makes learning most effective for an individual. The variety of activities now possible makes it easy to create many types of effective learning experiences and environments. Many problem-based courses, such as financial, statistical, or engineering courses, use live classroom tools for interactive, real-time problem-solving. These same tools can be used for virtually any discipline for real-time Q&A review sessions, project reviews, virtual coaching, or office hours.

While working professionals often choose to complete advanced degrees online so that they can make use of the asynchronous, anytime, anywhere features of a program, these same learners enjoy getting together at a specific time to interact in real time. When getting together synchronously doesn't work for reasons such as multiple time zones or travel requirements, the recording and archiving features make it possible to feel as if one has actually "been there."

Some of the most robust synchronous tools are set up and run by institutions and accommodate small to large groups. Informal tools such as Google Hangout and Skype, as well as the simple telephone service that is essentially free with smart phones, are excellent tools for small group collaboration, team work, role plays, debates, and presentations.

Best Practice 6: Ask for Informal Feedback Early in the Term

Course evaluations have been called "postmortem evaluations" because they are done after the fact. This means nothing can be changed to increase satisfaction or facilitate more learning and engagement. Early feedback surveys or informal discussions are effective in getting students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course and solicit suggestions and ideas on what might help them have a better course experience. Often early feedback can alert you to students having difficulty with something as fixable as access to materials, or some minor technology glitch.

This early feedback is done in about week 2 of a fifteen-week course so time is available to make corrections and modifications while the course is

ongoing. For the many popular shorter courses, as six- or eight-week terms, informal feedback can be done as early as midweek of the first week.

Best Practice 7: Prepare Discussion Posts That Invite Responses, Questions, Discussions, and Reflections

One of the primary differences between the online and blended classroom and the classroom of the campus-based course is how students and faculty communicate and the range of tools that they use to do so. After all, we don't see the students as often; rather, we get to know them by what they write and say in the discussion boards and their assignments and, to a lesser degree, in e-mail, phone, and collaborative online classrooms.

The communication space that is the heart and soul of the online course community is the discussion board. This is the primary place where faculty talk to students and students talk to other students. This is also the place where students and faculty get to know one another, and the tool that helps a widely dispersed group of students and faculty become a learning community.

Discussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class. A key difference, of course, is that these discussions are asynchronous, meaning that students have time for thought and reflection. Another key difference is that discussions, blogs, and other tools require written or audio comments that are captured and become part of a course archive.

Discussions are often designed for one of the following learning purposes (Painter, Coffin, & Hewings, 2003; Goodyear, Jones, Asensio, Hodgson, & Steeples, 2003, cited in Grogan, 2005):

- Provide a place for an open question-and-answer forum
- Encourage critical or creative thinking
- Reinforce domain or procedural processes
- Achieve social interaction and community building so learners get to know each other personally and intellectually
- Validate thinking and experiences
- Support students in their own reflections and inquiries

Here are a few hints for discussion postings culled from many conversations with experienced online faculty:

- Create open-ended questions that learners can explore and apply the concepts that they are learning.
- Model Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions: "Why do you think that?" "What is your reasoning?" "Is there an alternative strategy?"

- Ask clarifying questions that encourage students to think about what they know and don't know.
- Stagger due dates of the responses, and consider a midpoint summary or encouraging comments.

Provide guidelines and instruction on responding to other students. For example, suggest a two-part response: (1) "Say what you liked or agreed with or what resonated with you," and (2) "Conclude with a follow-up question such as what you are wondering about or curious about."

Best Practice 8: Think Digital for All Course Content

If course content is not digital, it is as if it does not exist. If it is not digital, we can't access it from our phones, tablets, and laptops, or the cloud. Students turn first and most frequently to the content and applications that are available with their digital devices.

Learners today want to be learning anywhere, anytime, and often while they are doing other things, such as driving, taking care of children, or exercising. While paper and physical books are still handy and convenient and can be restful for our eyes, most students expect to be able to access course content from wherever they happen to be and whenever they have even five to fifteen minutes to read, think or reflect. Smartphones, tablets, the Internet, and the cloud provide a digital environment that means learners do not have to worry about the physical location or carry-weight of course content.

E-textbooks, replete with animations and study tools, are becoming widely available, so it is now easier to design a course with options for digital content while also providing physical text options. Selecting a textbook available in multiple formats can be a boon to students, particularly working professionals. Another reason for thinking digital is that digital content often includes audio and video resources, adding a dimension above and beyond text that can engage and help learners with core concepts, and provides links to a world of professional examples and tools. Digital resources such as animations and immersive simulations can provide practice in building skills and increase the types of learning outcomes that learners can achieve.

A reference document with instructions on remotely accessing library resources is a must for online courses. In addition, a key member of the instructional team is the library reference person assigned to support online learners. Make friends with your library personnel.

Students enjoy seeing how what they are learning links to current events. Thus building links to current events into discussions, blogs, and

announcements supports the exploration stage of early grappling with core course concepts. So this best practice includes encouraging students to make good use of Internet resources.

Another effective practice is to enlist student help in finding and identifying relevant and engaging resources. Students often are better than their instructors at discerning which resources will be of interest and use to themselves and to their peers. Enlisting students in this task also means that students will find resources that illustrate course content in action, helping them make more connections to the content and to their lives.

Best Practice 9: Combine Core Concept Learning with Customized and Personalized Learning

This best practice integrates a number of core learning principles. Briefly, this practice requires faculty, as part of their course design process *prior* to the course, to identify the core concepts, questions, and performance goals for a course. Then *during* the course a faculty's responsibility is to mentor learners through a set of increasingly complex and customized questions, problems, and projects to help learners apply these core concepts and develop their own knowledge structures.

In practical terms for online courses, it means designing options and choices within learning experiences, assignments, and special projects. Supporting learners with their personal and professional goals that are closely linked to the performance goals of a course and even beyond the course parameters benefits the learners individually and as a group. It enhances the meaningfulness of the learning and infuses learner enthusiasm for completing the assignments.

A key principle supporting concept learning comes from psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978). He noted that concepts are not words, but rather organized and intricate knowledge clusters. This simple but profound truth means that while we usually teach in a linear fashion, presenting concepts individually and in small clusters, we need to continually reapply core concepts within differing contexts, such as those in case studies, problems, and scenarios. The wealth of research studies on the brain and the mind confirms this practice (Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, 2014).

Effectively learning concepts, as studies of novice and expert learners demonstrate, requires a knowledge of patterns and relationships. Individual facts and vocabulary are part of a knowledge structure, but they require connections to make them meaningful (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich & Hoffman, 2006; Chi, 2006).

When faced with a new field or discipline, students initially focus on learning the vocabulary of a discipline, but this activity is often done in

isolation from an understanding of the concepts that give the words meaning. Without the underlying concepts, words are akin to isolated weeds and seeds likely to be blown away by the winds of time, usually mere hours after an exam or other learning experience. Learning individual facts and vocabulary is just one of the early steps in learning concepts.

One effective teaching and learning strategy advocates making students' thinking visible (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991; Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011; visiblethinking.org). Making our thinking visible requires students to create, talk, write, explain, analyze, judge, report, and inquire. These activities make it clear to students themselves, the faculty, and fellow learners what they know or don't know, what they are puzzled about, and what they might be curious about. Such activities stimulate students' growth from concept awareness to concept acquisition, building in that "series of intellectual operations" that Vygotsky believes is required for concept acquisition. Such a series of activities also maps the development of knowledge as described in Bloom's taxonomy.

Discussion forums, blogging, journals, wikis, and similar social networking type tools provide excellent communication channels for engaging learners in clarifying and enlarging their mental models or concepts and building links and identifying relationships.

This best practice builds flexibility into learning experiences to meet the needs of individual learners while designing to ensure that all students reach competency in the learning outcomes of a course. This practice means that an instructor is continuously referring to and building in relationships of core concepts, as expanded in Best Practice 12, rigorously connecting core concepts to learning outcomes, while also focusing on learners as individuals.

Customizing practices asks students how they plan on using the learning experiences. If they are to talk or share any particular facts, examples, or stories with others, just which ones would they share? We build these questions into forums and assignments, always ensuring that the learners elaborate, apply, relate, and share knowledge with others.

As noted in the content best practice, the best learning experience is a shared learning experience that meets the individual needs of each of the learners.

This practice is a way of implementing three of the core learning principles from Chapter Two: Principle 2, "Learners bring their own personalized and customized knowledge, skills, and attitudes to the experience"; Principle 4, "All learners do not need to learn all the course content"; and Principle 6, "Every learner has a zone of proximal

development that defines the space that a learner is ready to develop into useful knowledge."

Best Practice 10: Plan a Good Closing and Wrap Activity for the Course

As a course starts coming to a close and winding down, it is easy to focus on assessing and grading students and forget the value of a good closing experience. In the final weeks of a course, students are likely to be stressed and somewhat overwhelmed by the remaining work. In this state, they often do not pause to make the lists and do the planning that can help reduce stress and provide a calming atmosphere. A useful image for reducing stress is in David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* (2015). Allen notes that making a list helps us to clear the "psychic ram" of our brains so that we feel more relaxed and more in control. Once we have made lists and prepared our schedule, we don't have to continually remind ourselves of what needs to be done and when.

End-of-course experiences often include student presentations, summaries, and analyses. These reports and presentations provide insights into what useful knowledge students are taking away from a course. At the same time, these learning events can provide a final opportunity for faculty to remind students of core concepts and fundamental principles. These end-of-course experiences are a good time to use live classrooms, YouTube, and other synchronous collaborative tools. Chapter Nine is devoted to course wrapping (CW) tips and ideas.

Four More Best Practices for Online and Blended Teaching and Learning

These additional best practices started their lives as tips in the 2010 version of this *Survival Guide*. However, the power of these practices to help ensure meaningful learning suggests that they touch on overarching themes that should have higher visibility as we design learning experiences. In the years since the first edition, these practices kept coming to the fore as we coached faculty.

As noted earlier, the last few years has witnessed a flowering of research on teaching in a multitude of online and blended environments. While the ten best practices are really still the absolute beginner's set of best practices, these four additional best practices go beyond the basics and contribute significantly to the design of experiences that learners savor and enjoy.

Tips on how to implement these practices are expanded significantly in the tip section of the book.

Best Practice 11: Assess as You Go by Gathering Evidences of Learning

This best practice makes sense for everyone—for learners, for instructors, and for administrators. It keeps a focus on what the learner is doing and thinking throughout a course. This practice supports the gathering of evidences of learning throughout the course and also provides additional data for program accountability (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Suskie, 2009). This practice is one of the Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, published by AAHE in 1996 and updated over time (Astin, et al., 2012; Hutchings, Ewell, & Banta, 2012).

What does this best practice mean? Rather than pushing all assessment toward papers, exams, and/or a final project, this practice recommends distributing assessment throughout a course. One of the key elements of course design is an assessment plan, showing the relative value and importance of assignments, project milestones, and other course contributions and participation.

One feature of emerging assessment practice that supports "assessing as you go" is expanding the audience for a student's work. In addition to the classic approach of assessment being a one-way street between an individual learner and an instructor, this practice recommends having learners work in small teams that work collaboratively on peer review and peer consulting on assignments such as project proposals. Outside experts can also play a role and participate in review and evaluation of student's work (Moallem, 2005). Public exhibitions, as they are traditionally done in media classes, can lead the way. Also consider providing options for students to create many types of experiences beyond just writing papers. (Boettcher, 2011)

Applying this practice means we gather evidences of learning throughout the course. This relieves the end-of-course stress and burdens. Another stress-reliever is also giving learners more choice in how they demonstrate knowledge.

Best Practice 12: Rigorously Connect Content to Core Concepts and Learning Outcomes

This best practice is rooted in learning principles such as distributed review practices and elaboration of facts and concepts. We know that learning takes time. We know that learning takes practice. We know that deep

learning depends on seeing and using concepts in different contexts and scenarios and relationships. This best practice means "always coming back to how knowledge is embodied in the core concepts, patterns, relationships." Repetition and use of knowledge is what helps learners construct a meaningful knowledge representational structure in their minds (Kandel, 2006; Brown, Roediger, & McDaniel, 2014).

We spend a great deal of time developing learning outcomes, but then these outcomes are tucked away in a section of the syllabus that is mostly invisible. A best practice in the first week of the course is to assign your students a task to read the section, review the learning outcomes, and identify the ones that make the most sense to them; then, to customize and personalize some of the learning outcomes, have them answer this question, "How do I want to be different in my person, in my mind after this course?"

Best Practice 13: Develop and Use a Content Frame for the Course

This best practice involves two steps: first, designing a content frame for the course, and second, developing a habit of using and referring to that cognitive map, while teaching the course. The biggest danger generally faced by students is the feeling of being totally overwhelmed by all the content and as a consequence getting lost in the forest of details and not developing confidence in the really important ideas.

What is a content frame? Content frames are also called cognitive maps, visual graphics, and overviews. We like to use the term *content frame* because preparing a frame for a course helps learners get a holistic sense of a course. It presents a clear picture of what is to be learned in a course and what can be learned later as interests develop and time permits. Adventurous, curious students can always delve more deeply into course content, but they know at what point they can stop and still know what they need to know. Providing a clear overview of the core concepts, key knowledge, and types of problems competent learners should be able to handle provides a focus for the term of the course. Additionally, being able to refer back to the content frame regularly and see the content visually helps students to construct their own knowledge representations in their minds.

One of the tips (CB Tip 3 in Chapter Six) focuses on strategies and ideas for creating a syllabus with this type of content frame. Don't miss it. This tip suggests that creating a syllabus that really jump-starts learning is a fantastic investment. Think of the choices our students have before them.

How do we pull them in? How do we make working on our course something that they look forward to? The goal is to create a content frame that causes students to say, "Wow, thanks so much. I can really see what we are going to be doing and how everything all fits together."

Best Practice 14: Design Experiences to Help Learners Make Progress on Their Novice-to-Expert Journey

This best practice views students as learners, working their way along a path from novice to expert. It suggests strategies and approaches that assume the learner wants to develop knowledge, skill, and expertise in a field of inquiry and to do what it takes to help the learners move forward toward that goal.

It is sometimes assumed that motivating students is a problem. But while learning takes time, effort, and energy, the positive feelings that result from developing confidence in using knowledge to solve problems is intrinsically very motivating.

An entire body of research literature examines and describes the various steps and stages on the way from being a novice to becoming an expert. This body of literature includes work by researchers and theorists we have examined earlier: Piaget, Bruner, Brown, and more recently, Ericsson and Chi. The most of t-quoted "fact" about developing expertise is that it takes about 10,000 hours. If that is the case, then what are the steps, and how do we structure and design courses to help students on their preferred expertise journey? As we design the learning experiences, what stage of their journey is each learner on and how can the learning experiences help them move forward?

Briefly, here are the major milestones in a journey to expertise: novice, advanced novice (initiate), apprentice, journeyman, expert, and master (Chi, 2006). Each of these milestones represents from 1,500 to 2,500 hours of knowledge, skill, and acquisition investment. To be useful at the course level, it will be important for an instructor to identify core concepts and set specific competency goals that link the learning outcomes to the development of expertise. The research on deliberate practice initiated by Ericsson and Charness (1994) is particularly useful for graduate-level professional studies.

Conclusion

Course designs have traditionally focused on content questions, such as what content to present, in what order and what depth. Then in response, instructors have focused on covering the material, getting through the book, and meeting expectations so that faculty in other courses wouldn't

muse and wonder, "Didn't you learn these concepts in this earlier course? And didn't you study the work and contributions of [fill in your favorite important person]?"

A major drawback with course designs that prioritize content is that this approach focuses attention on what the faculty member is doing, thinking, and talking about and not on the interaction and engagement of students with the core concepts and skills of a course. Trends in higher education since the late 1990s have encouraged a focus on learners as a priority, resulting in many publications such as *Launching a Learning-Centered College* (O'Banion, 1999) and Weimer's *Learner-Centered Teaching* (2002, 2013). This movement refocuses instruction on the learner and away from the content, a shift that encourages faculty to develop a habit of asking questions such as, "What is going on inside the learner's head?" "How much of the content and the tools can he or she actually use?" "What are learners thinking, and how did they arrive at their respective positions?" This focus on the learner has evolved to trends on accountability, student success, personalized learning, and analytics to capture what works (Johnson et al., 2015).

We have much more to learn about effective and joyful and meaningful teaching and learning, and more about teaching and learning in the variety of online, blended, and face-to-face environments. The good news is that we now know much more than what we did and have much more research evidence on what works.

Summary—and What's Next

This set of best practices is really just the tip of the iceberg in developing expertise in effective teaching and learning, but we hope you find it a useful set of practices as you get started in whatever new environment you will be using. Chapters Five through Nine provide tips and examples, as well as summaries and themes for what is happening in the four phases of a course.

Exercise and Reflection

If you are using this book for a course in faculty development, here are two activities to consider using to have faculty think more deeply about these best practices and to share their ideas and beliefs with their colleagues.

1. What top three best practices resonate with you? What would you add to this list as your personal best practice?
2. Spend time reflecting on these best practices. Where do your weaknesses lie? How will you strengthen those areas?