Guide: Fully Online and Blended Courses

A GUIDE FOR PROFESSORS
What do you need to know?  
…be ready!

You are teaching a course that is being taught entirely online. Your course website now contains all the necessary content. The course objectives, learning activities, and assessments have all been carefully developed. What do you do now? In many ways, an online course is very similar to a traditional face-to-face course, but there are certain aspects that need to be taken into consideration.

You will likely not have the opportunity to meet your students in person. The same is true for them. No doubt you know the subject matter you teach, but your charisma and talent for conveying your enthusiasm for the subject in the classroom may not come across as well online. As a result, some students could become less motivated and drop out. How can we keep students interested and maintain their enthusiasm for the course?
In this guide, we will try to answer these questions and share best practices by presenting tips, suggestions, and resources designed to help you be successful in your online teaching, whether it be for a fully online or blended course.

Before the Course Starts

Before the first week of classes and especially before your students descend upon the course website, it is imperative to be prepared.

Hosting the Course Website

Course websites at the University of Ottawa are hosted through the Learning Management System Brightspace. Online courses are accessed through the Virtual Campus (https://uottawa.saea-tlss.ca/en/virtual-campus/faculty-members). Make sure you are familiar with this virtual environment and the tools it contains (e.g. tools for putting up content, communication, assignments, and evaluation tools) in order to get off to a good start.

HOW TO USE THIS PLATFORM?

- **Connection to Virtual Campus**
  - https://uottawa.brightspace.com
  - Login: uoAccess ID (your uOttawa email)
  - Password: same as for your email

- The Teaching and Learning Support Service Team is responsible for the Virtual Campus and they have the expertise to help you with every aspect of Brightspace. You can also meet one-on-one with a LMS Training and Support Officer in the computer lab at Vanier Hall, Room 1022, at 136 Jean-Jacques Lussier or contact the team by filling out an online request form at: https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/support-form.

- For technical questions related to your fully online or blended course (problem accessing the course, error messages, etc.), please contact the Computing help Centre:
  - Information Technology (Request Help)
    - http://it.uottawa.ca/service-desk-request
  - Telephone: 613-562-5800 ext. 6555 or toll free 1-877-868-8292, extension 6555

You are ready to offer your first blended course. You have carefully considered your teaching strategies, including which learning component will be offered face-to-face and online so students can benefit from a rich and varied learning approach. The Web site for the online components is now populated with content and autonomous learning activities. Now, how does one ensure students will adjust to their new platform? How can one keep students interested and sustain their motivation?
For questions related to the functionalities of your course in Virtual Campus (posting in discussion forums, submitting assignments, using the email tool, getting access to your grades, etc.), please contact the Virtual Campus Support:

- By phone 7 days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.: 1-866-811-3201
- Or by filling out the online support form ([https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/support-form](https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/support-form)),
- 24 hours a day, seven days a week

To avoid unpleasant surprises, we recommend that you check the following before the course starts:

- The assignment due dates.
- The academic calendar.
- Announcements and other messages.
- If you use the selective release feature based on dates as a way of managing students’ progress through the course, you will need to adjust these dates.
- Check any reference links or links provided elsewhere in the site to ensure they still work.

YOUR COURSE OUTLINE/SYLLABUS

Do not forget to update your course outline/syllabus. Here are a few changes to remember to make:

- Important dates related to assessment and evaluation:
  - Submission of homework and assignments
    - How/when students will submit their work
  - Quizzes and summative evaluations
  - Etc.
Procedures Regarding How the Course Is Going to Work

- How will your students get in touch with you?
  - Discussion forums where students can ask questions
  - By email – from Website
  - Office hours

You will be able to hold office hours using a synchronous communication tool like the telephone, chat, skype or Adobe Connect (Teaching and Learning Support Service for more information: saea-tlss@uottawa.ca or Phone: 613-562-5300).

Blended Course

When you are not physically in the office, the communication tools in your course website can be easy to use from any location with an Internet connection. Just log in to the Virtual Campus!

- Create a “netiquette” guideline that outlines an acceptable code of conduct for online communication. Better yet, let the students come up with their own guidelines! They will monitor and enforce discussion rules or “netiquette” better than any instructor could.

General Guidelines for Fully Online Courses

Pace

Make sure that activities are distributed evenly each week to ensure students provide consistent effort during all course weeks, so as to keep students from getting too far ahead while others lag behind, this could be problematic for example in discussions or group activities.

Exploration Activity

It is useful to provide an ice-breaker activity. Typically, an ice-breaker activity is a simple task not related to the course content that your students can accomplish quite easily. Although seemingly trivial, this kind of activity enables students to locate the course website, ensure they know their login and password, familiarize themselves with their online course environment, and possibly even introduce themselves to the group and meet their classmates. This type of activity also allows students to make connections from the onset, helping build a community of learning where they will feel comfortable sharing knowledge with their peers.
General Guidelines for Blended Courses

Exploration Activity

During the first week of course, it would be important to create an activity that allows students to explore the online components while learning to navigate the site. Prepare an activity, such as a rally, that will let them explore content, resources, assignments, as well as the autonomous learning activities they will need to accomplish. You could also consider a tutorial to help students navigate the site.

Link Between Class and Online Components

Students who are taking a blended course for the first time could neglect to do the online components, perhaps because they don’t quite understand how these activities fit into their learning or because they have not yet developed the necessary skills to accomplish autonomous online activities.

During your first class session, it would be important to clearly identify which components will take place in class, for example: presentations, debates, case studies, lab work, formative exam etc.; and which component will be online, for example: read content, view videos, participate in discussion forums, accomplish diverse activities, consult rubrics/grades etc. – and explain how these activities are related and an integral part of the course. In order to guide students in their learning, use Brightspace tools, such as the “announcements” or “calendar” tools to remind students of due dates, as well as upcoming discussions and activities in which they will need to take part. It would also be good to add a note explaining how these activities fit in with the class component.

Support

It is important to consider that certain students are not necessarily ready to work online on autonomous learning activities. Consequently, it will be necessary to follow their progress closely in the first few weeks in order to encourage and support them with their learning.

In this epoch of technology and social media, one would think everyone is comfortable with technology– thus entirely at ease with a blended course format. However, a number of students may not feel comfortable using technology in a learning context. They will need to learn to navigate and to use the necessary tools in order to maximize their learning experience and attain their learning objectives.

Your TAs will need to be well trained and supported in order to help students adjust to a blended mode and develop autonomous skills.
Access Management for Fully Online and Blended Courses

When you are happy with the course website and all the dates, links, and tools have been updated, you are ready to give your students access. It is recommended that you give students access a few days or even a few weeks before the start of the course. This will give your students a chance to become familiar with the course website, find out about any required course materials (textbooks or course packs) and order them. Having early access to the course will help students be ready to start the first week.

Concerning fully online courses, students will also be able to complete any exploration activities you have planned and get to know you if you have prepared an introductory text or video to introduce yourself.

In order to explore the online component of their blended course, students will be able to participate in activities, such as a rally or view a tutorial to explore course content and learn to navigate their new learning environment.
During the Semester

Throughout the first week, students will start to access your course. Just like a traditional face-to-face course, some will be highly motivated and quickly examine the content, try out some of the activities, and take part in discussions. Others, on the other hand, may be more reticent or shy to participate in a discussion forum.

Grading Students’ Work

Many different types of evaluation can be integrated to an online course. Verify with your department if specific assessments are required, such as the obligation to take an end of term exam on campus. If not, various types of assessments can be designed online. When you coordinate an exam online don’t forget it is possible students may come from various regions with different time zones.

Various types of evaluation can be integrated in blended courses, for example: multiple-choice formative and summative exercises/quizzes, peer evaluations, auto-evaluations, participation to discussions, etc., and furthermore you can benefit from Brightspace tools to submit work, and also calculate and post grades.
One must consider that online evaluations, whether within fully online or blended courses, can save your department money (reservation and preparation of rooms, the cost of proctoring the exam, courier costs, etc.) We encourage you to use the Assignment tool in Brightspace and provide online summative/formative quizzes and exams. Furthermore, grades can also be attributed throughout the course for participation to online forums, and learning activities, thus supporting the students’ time and effort more evenly throughout the course. Here are some ideas that may help you:

- Brightspace offers computer-based assessment tools that provide immediate feedback, significantly reducing your marking workload. Here is a sample of the types of questions that can be included in an online quiz: multiple-choice, true/false, fill in the blank, short answer, paragraph, matching, and calculated questions. One can also include all of the question types within one exam.

- Individual and group assignments. Consider having students submit them at multiple stages. Provide feedback especially during the initial stages. Students need to read the feedback to see how they are progressing in order to incorporate modifications into the subsequent submission of their assignment. Grade only the final submission.

- Peer assessment teaches them to do better self-assessment. Why not have them do both?

- Attribute participation points when students contribute to a discussion forum and evaluate the way they analyze and integrate the subject matter. You could, among other things, evaluate the quality of exchanges based on an established rubric.

All of the proposed evaluation methods require time and careful preparation.

To make grading easier, we recommend the use of evaluation rubrics. Teach your TAs how to use the rubric and then have them grade 3 assignments and compare how they scored each one. Modify the rubric, if necessary, or spend some more time teaching the TAs how to use the rubric until they can come to a common understanding on scoring the assignments. This will improve the inter-rater reliability in large classes where multiple TAs are responsible for the grading.

### Consultation Sessions

**Fully Online Course**

Synchronous tools such as skype or Adobe Connect (Teaching and Learning Support Service for more information: saea-tlss@uottawa.ca or Phone: 613-562-5300) are also available to you when interacting in real time. You could use this mode of communication when conducting one-on-one interviews with your students to answer questions or provide feedback related to an assignment.

**Consultations in a blended environment**

- One-on-one consultation sessions are normally done face-to-face before or after class or during scheduled office hours.
Follow up!

Administrative tools in Brightspace give you the ability to monitor student activity. A few weeks into the course, you will need to identify those who are falling behind and help them get back on track. Often all it takes is a personalized email and sufficient encouragement to improve their sense of belonging to the course and show them that they are not alone, but part of the learning community. To be successful with this retention strategy, it is imperative that you identify these students early on in the semester.

Establishing Good Communication!

In general, but especially when there are many students registered in the course, students will attempt to communicate with you in a variety of ways. Everyone’s expectations vary considerably in terms of preferred modes of communication and response times. Because of this, it is important to establish your terms right from the outset in the course outline/syllabus or through a “contract” that you establish between you and your students. In some cases, it can even be very beneficial to involve students in the development of such a “contract”. Here are some things you may want to include:

- A reasonable response time (from you or a TA). For the first two weeks of the course, your response time may be quicker to ensure your students get off to a good start. Typically, they will expect a response within a few hours (6-8) for the first week, and 48 hours (or 2 business days) thereafter.

  » The fact that the website is available any time does not require you to be online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
• Homework assignment submission requirements.

• Guidelines on acceptable code of conduct for online communication:
  » Inappropriate language
  » Personal attacks, lack of respect or a condescending attitude towards others
  » Emoticons (e.g. smiley faces 😊 to indicate that someone is kidding). Humor and emotions can easily be misinterpreted in the absence of non-verbal communication in an online environment
    ~ Getting off topic in a discussion thread
    ~ Etc.

Motivation

It is not always easy to keep students motivated throughout the semester. This can be an issue in traditional face-to-face classes, and even more so in a learning environment that is entirely online or blended. Here are some suggestions for actively engaging your students when they are online:

• Respond to students’ postings directly, but try to provide all students with questions and comments in order to encourage everyone to participate.

• Encourage students to respond to comments posted by their classmates. Explain how worthwhile it is to build on each other’s learning.

• Emphasize the importance of submitting assignments.

• Encourage students to collaborate with each other by creating collaboration opportunities: forum, blog, pair work, group work etc.

• Vary the way you present material/course content in order to correspond to a greater number of learner modalities.

• Present activities and projects where students will be able to demonstrate their learning creatively.

• Recognizing students can express understanding of essential course content in multiple ways, consider offering students a choice concerning the type of assignment they can hand in: choice of subject, format: blog, wiki, video, essay etc.

• Encourage reflective activities, such as a journal.
• Encourage and motivate your TAs.
• Provide constructive feedback with minimal delay.
• Other than discussion forums, encourage students to communicate with you in different ways: blog, wiki, audio or video clips, chat sessions etc.
• Use the “announcements” tool to remind students of upcoming deadlines for the week and to make the home page more dynamic.

Fully Online Course
Establish a “student lounge” which is a discussion forum where students can communicate with each other just like they would in the hallway before and after class. Tell the students that you and the TAs will not take part, but that you might peak in from time to time to see how things are going.

Blended Course
Establish an informal discussion forum where students can exchange ideas and experiences beyond the classroom and build on their learning.
• Familiarize yourself with the Student Help Resources available so that you can immediately assist them when an issue arises:
  » Technology support
    ~ Telephone: 613-562-5800, ext. 6555 or toll free at 1-877-868-8292, ext. 6555
    ~ Computing assistance request form: https://it.uottawa.ca/service-desk-request
    ~ Email: cybersos@uOttawa.ca;
  » Non-technical Assistance
    ~ Student Academic Success Service (SASS): http://www.sass.uOttawa.ca
      • See online services available
    » Online Service:
• See Appendix 1 for more details.

**Accessibility and Best Teaching and Learning Practices**

As of January 2013, the Government of Ontario requires Universities and Colleges in the province to provide accessibility training to all educators. This is a great opportunity to discuss best practices in teaching and learning. The Introduction Guide presents an overview of inclusive teaching practices. The guide: Accessibility Resource Kit for Professors and Educators, introduces tools and strategies for course design and delivery, which should positively influence the professor-student interaction, the syllabus, the teaching/learning dynamic and the evaluation process.

**After the Course Ends**

Student access is automatically managed by the system. You can decide when students stop having access to the course. You can allow students to continue to access the course website for a few days or a few weeks after the course ends. This also gives you time to enter marks in the Grade Centre and your students time to view their results.

Finally, we recommend that you take advantage of the feedback you received throughout the semester to make any necessary changes as soon as possible. Furthermore, it is recommended you create a course evaluation to be sent out to students around mid-term and at the end of the semester. You can refer to comments from your students and teaching assistants, combined with your own experience, to review what worked well and what needs to be improved. It will be easier to make changes if you implement them right away.
Appendix 1

Services and Resources That Can Be Accessed Online
Whether you are teaching a course that is hybrid or entirely online, this list might come in handy.

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<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>SERVICES</th>
<th>WEBSITE ADDRESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>uoZone</td>
<td>• All student Web tools and information are centralized in uoZone.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/en/students">http://www.uottawa.ca/en/students</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Virtual Campus</td>
<td>• List of courses</td>
<td><a href="https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/support-form">https://tlss.uottawa.ca/site/support-form</a></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• 8 AM to 8 PM, 7 days a week by Phone: 1-866-811-3201</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>• General computing help</td>
<td>Telephone: 613-562-5800, ext. 6555 or toll free at 1-877-868-8292, ext. 6555</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>• Password changes</td>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:cybersos@uOttawa.ca">cybersos@uOttawa.ca</a></td>
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<td>InfoService</td>
<td>• Transcripts</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/#service">http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/#service</a></td>
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<td>• DocuNet</td>
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<td>• Copies of diplomas</td>
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<td>docUcentre</td>
<td>• Purchase your Course Packs online</td>
<td>• <a href="https://it.uottawa.ca/print/">https://it.uottawa.ca/print/</a></td>
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<td>Bookstore</td>
<td>• Purchase your textbooks online</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.bkstr.com/ottawastore/home">http://www.bkstr.com/ottawastore/home</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>SASS (Student Academic Success Service)</td>
<td>• See the online resources available</td>
<td>• Documents available online (referencing, grammar, the writing process, the structure of a paper): <a href="http://sass.uottawa.ca/en/writing/undergraduate/online-document.php">http://sass.uottawa.ca/en/writing/undergraduate/online-document.php</a> • Questions via email: <a href="mailto:awhc@uOttawa.ca">awhc@uOttawa.ca</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>University Lingo</td>
<td>• Words you need to know and understand!</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/">http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>• There are many possibilities when it comes to financing your studies: scholarships, government loans, work-study program, etc.</td>
<td>• <a href="http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/">http://www.uottawa.ca/strategic-enrollment-management/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching Evaluation</td>
<td>• Provide feedback on a course and an instructor’s teaching by filling out a questionnaire.</td>
<td>• <a href="https://www.uottawa.ca/vice-president-academic/evaluaction/student-zone">https://www.uottawa.ca/vice-president-academic/evaluaction/student-zone</a></td>
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<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>• Information and workshops on accessibility</td>
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