Northwestern | SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

SPS TEACHING

High-Impact Teaching Practices for Online Instruction

Course design is a critical part of effective and meaningful online education, yet learning is a social process: the instructor's active facilitation of learning and interactions is essential for students' ability to engage with the course materials and meet course learning outcomes. SPS students consistently tell us that active engagement and regular feedback from their instructors are the most critical factors in their learning.

High impact teaching practices establish a set of shared expectations and support quality instruction in all School of Professional Studies (SPS) courses. The practices and strategies in this document are drawn from research on teaching and learning. The SPS academic team and the faculty director of your program will refer to these practices in assessing the learning environment in your course. Faculty development opportunities and course design at SPS are centered around these practices.

Your presence in your online course should give students confidence that you are guiding them through the course and monitoring their progress. Regular updates and interaction between you and your students indicate that you're **actively** facilitating the course to meet their learning needs. Instructor presence should be established and maintained in the following ways.

Communication

Your presence should give students confidence that you are guiding the course, monitoring progress, and responding to the learning needs of the cohort. Presence is built through predictable communication, active facilitation, and personal follow-through. You should proactively communicate with students in multiple ways **each week** and establish that you are available to receive and respond to communication from students.

Course Preparation

- Make sure that your course is published and available to students 2 weeks prior to the start of the quarter.
- Include your Northwestern email and specific information about your availability and response time in your getting started module, syllabus, and welcome announcement.
- Your Northwestern email needs to be your **main** mode of communication with individual students; sharing a phone number should be a final option and only as needed.
- Review course materials and update examples, resources, perspectives, and developments that will help this cohort connect course concepts to current practice.
- Schedule 3-5 synchronous sessions and set the expectation that additional sessions could

be added in response to the needs of the student cohort.
- Send a welcome announcement to students setting expectations for how you will communicate with them during class.

During Class

- Communicate with your class throughout **each week** via announcements, discussion boards, and/or synchronous sessions.
    - Announcements can be used to introduce the week's content, summarize the previous week's highlights, provide collective feedback on assignments to the whole class, or remind students of upcoming deadlines or course activities.
    - Discussion boards should be **actively** facilitated by you and/or your teaching assistant.
    - After each synchronous session, post an announcement summarizing the session and making students aware of any new content or assignment guidance. The Zoom AI companion can be used to support creation of this content so you and your teaching assistant can actively engage in the session. For additional information about using AI in teaching, see the SPS Guidance on Faculty Use of AI for Course Development and Teaching.
- Reach out to individual students who have missed assignment deadlines or are not engaged in synchronous or asynchronous discussions.
- Provide detailed feedback on student assignments within the response time established on your syllabus.
- Check your Northwestern email daily and respond to student questions within the response time established in your syllabus (generally, 48 hours maximum). If you receive an emailed question and feel that the answer would benefit the entire class, post the question (anonymously) and answer as an announcement.
- If prior commitments will prevent you from being active in your course for more than 72 hours, post an announcement in advance to make your students aware of your upcoming absence. In addition, reach out to the assistant director of your program via email to notify them.

Discussion Facilitation

Through participation in discussion, you advance student thinking and reinforce course concepts. You are expected to actively participate in asynchronous discussions. Rather than responding to every post, step in at appropriate times to ensure that the discussion is productive. Here are some ideas for your involvement:

- Pose questions or introduce alternative ideas/viewpoints to push students' thinking and deepen discussion.
- Refocus the discussion if it goes off on tangents.
- Synthesize comments at some point in a discussion to emphasize and explain core course concepts, to highlight especially insightful student contributions, or to clarify common misunderstandings that arise.
- Use practical examples to illustrate complex concepts and, where relevant, model how professionals critically evaluate information, including AI-generated outputs.

If a student poses a question directed to you on the discussion board, you are expected to respond within 48 hours. Encourage students to use Canvas' @ mentioning feature to tag you in their questions and set your Canvas notifications to email you when they do.

Online discussions can sometimes result in difficult interpersonal dynamics, misinterpretations of tone or word choice, and interaction patterns that are harder to recognize without face-to-face communication. Your active facilitation and participation in the discussion boards should enable you to become aware of any interpersonal issues before they begin to impact the larger course community or learning environment. SPS staff are always available for support if you're unsure how to address a challenging discussion or class dynamic.

Feedback

Instructor feedback should be timely, relevant, and actionable. Effective feedback helps students understand their progress, build trust, and improve future performance.

Providing Individual Student Feedback

Understanding that feedback is a teaching opportunity, tailor your comments to engage with each student's ideas. Provide timely, relevant, and focused feedback that makes concrete suggestions for improvement on future assignments or work beyond the class.

- Provide feedback according to the established criteria (rubric, assignment instructions, checklist) in your course.
- Enter a 0 for any missed assignments when grading, so that students are aware of their current grade status in the course.
- Make yourself available for 1:1 meetings to talk students through their assignments and answer questions.
- Respond thoroughly to assignments in time for feedback to be applied to the next graded assignment or next stage of a larger project.
- Grading and feedback should be provided to the student within 7 days of the assignment due date. Major assignments may have a longer timeline as appropriate.
- Provide individualized feedback that engages with students' ideas, highlights strengths, and offers actionable suggestions tied to course concepts and skills.
- When student work incorporates AI tools, focus feedback on students' reasoning, judgment, application of course concepts, and ability to evaluate the quality and appropriateness of AI-generated content.
- Always remember the power of positive feedback; include feedback on the strengths as well as weaknesses in student work.

Providing Collective Feedback

At regular intervals, provide collective feedback that highlights key concepts, addresses misconceptions, and helps students connect course activities to learning goals.

- Summarize the weekly discussion and content in an announcement at the end of the module, highlighting key questions, themes, or ideas.

- Preview the weekly content in an announcement to help students transition from one week to the next.
- Reflect on the learning that you're observing in the course at key intervals, including common strengths, misconceptions, or questions related to the use of emerging technologies such as AI when relevant to the discipline.

Community Building

Online learning requires intentional community building. Research consistently shows that students learn more effectively when they feel a genuine sense of belonging, and that what belonging feels like varies by student identity and background. The SPS student body brings a wide range of racial, cultural, and professional identities to every course. Inclusive teaching means creating learning experiences that serve the needs of all students, "teach[ing] to and through the strengths of" their diverse backgrounds (Gay, 2010), and reflecting on how your own social identities shape your teaching perspective (Northwestern Principles of Inclusive Teaching, Searle Center, 2024).

Welcoming Students & Establishing Presence

- In your welcome announcement and introductory video, share your background, career path, and excitement about the subject. Invite TAs and co-instructors to post their own introductions, making their distinct roles clear to students.
- Invite students to introduce themselves via text or video in an opening discussion. Respond to each student individually and weave their interests and professional experiences into the course as it progresses.
- Use students' names and pronouns. Share your own name pronunciation using NameCoach and your pronouns on your Canvas user profile and invite students to do the same.

Cultivating an Online Community

- Reflect on your own positionality. Your social identities, disciplinary training, and professional experiences shape what you teach and how. Bring that awareness into your facilitation, particularly in courses that engage with social, historical, or contested topics.
- Review course materials before the start of the term and identify opportunities to incorporate current examples, resources, perspectives, and developments that may be relevant to the course content or the needs of a particular cohort.
- Co-create group agreements with students at the start of the course. Shared expectations reduce miscommunication and support respectful engagement, especially before discussions of controversial or sensitive topics. Revisit these agreements throughout the course, not just at the outset.
- Let students know they should bring harmful language or behavior to your attention promptly. Be prepared to address harmful interactions, reinforce community expectations, and intervene when power dynamics, exclusionary behavior, or disrespectful communication create barriers to learning.

Leveraging Student Experience

SPS students are adult professionals. Treat their expertise as a course asset.

- Facilitate discussions in ways that invite students to connect course concepts to their professional experiences.
- Create regular opportunities for students to connect course concepts to their own professional contexts and share relevant resources, current events, or perspectives with each other.
- Share your own career path and offer guidance to students exploring career options in the field. Point students toward relevant professional associations, particularly in end-of-course wrap-up, to support their continued growth.
- Share information about your program's Student Leadership Council.

Group Work

Group work can help students learn from one another, apply course concepts, and develop professional collaboration skills. Instructors play an important role in monitoring group dynamics, supporting collaboration, and helping students navigate challenges that arise during team-based work.

- Review group work expectations and grading criteria with students early in the project.
- Encourage groups to establish communication norms, meeting schedules, roles, and accountability practices.
- Check in regularly with groups and individual students, and provide timely guidance when challenges, confusion, or barriers to participation arise.
- Support effective collaboration by reinforcing professional communication, respectful disagreement, and shared responsibility.
- Be attentive to participation patterns and intervene when team dynamics limit equitable contribution or create barriers to learning.
- Help students connect lessons from the group-work process to the communication and collaboration skills expected in professional settings.

Teaching Values and AI Usage

For additional information about using AI in teaching, see the SPS Guidance on Faculty Use of AI for Course Development and Teaching. Human interaction remains at the heart of teaching and learning at SPS. AI may support carefully selected teaching tasks, but it must not replace faculty expertise, judgment, authentic voice, relationship-building, or direct engagement with students. Use the values below to guide your decisions about using AI in your teaching.

SPS Values for Teaching in an AI-Enabled Environment

- **Lead ethical and social transformation:** Help students evaluate, synthesize, interpret, and apply AI responsibly, with attention to ethics and accountability.
- **Empower human-AI collaboration through expertise:** Model how experienced professionals assess outputs, bring domain knowledge to decisions, and recognize where human judgment is essential.
- **Use AI only where it aligns with learning goals:** Teach students to examine why a tool is useful for a task, interrogate its outputs, and develop their own informed point of view.

Selected References

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Northwestern University Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching. (2024). *Northwestern principles of inclusive teaching*. Northwestern University.