Through regular student feedback, Jennifer Luzar, associate professor of language arts at Northwood University, has compiled the following things students want in their online courses and ways that she has adapted her instruction accordingly.

1. Quick responses

From the time she started teaching online, Luzar has made it a point to respond as soon as possible to her students. The typical reply from students is, “Wow! Thanks for the quick response,” as if this is not usually the case. “I used to be surprised by that because I feel that as online instructors it is our responsibility to try to get back to these people as quickly as possible,” Luzar says.

To meet this standard, Luzar uses her smartphone to reply to students wherever she may be. “It’s usually a quick yes or no, and the students can get on with their work,” Luzar says. When she recommends to colleagues to do the same, they often bristle at the thought of the online course intruding on other aspects of their lives. To this she replies: “Think about how much easier your personal life is going to be if you can answer a quick email at home at 7 p.m. instead of waiting until 8 the next morning and having 100 emails in your inbox. By then the student is annoyed or freaked out. The quicker you can get back to the students the better. They really appreciate that.”

To help minimize the number of student emails, Luzar encourages students to post their course management/logistical questions to special forum within the course and to monitor it frequently. Students often can answer each other’s questions before Luzar even sees the question. (She logs in to the forum several times a day to affirm correct responses from fellow students or provide the correct answer.) Having this forum reminds students that the instructor is not the only person with the answers and that “we are not here at their beck and call. This is a way to empower them to help one another and to be drivers of the course,” Luzar says.

2. Instructor presence
Students want to know that there is a real person teaching the course. Luzar has several ways to convey this sense of presence. One way is to include “a little bit about what’s going on with me” in the weekly announcements and by sharing photos or stories. (“I always say, ‘This is optional,’” Luzar says.)

She also includes a weekly one-minute video that introduces the unit. This provides “a constant feeling that there is a person on the other end,” Luzar says. These videos are informal and intended to be timely and personal, so she may talk about current events and mention students by name.

Luzar also uses video in a more formal way each week, condensing a weekly lecture into five minutes. She records these in a studio and reuses them in future sections of her courses.

3. Reminders

Many of Luzar’s students are nontraditional learners trying to keep their busy lives on track. Based on suggestions from students, Luzar provides reminders and forecasts to help students manage their time. Reminders let students know when things are due and forecasts come at the end of the week and alert students about what to expect in the next two weeks. Reminders and forecasts are in red to help students see them at a glance.

4. Easy-to-access course design

Students appreciate having all the content for a unit in one place instead of having things buried within folders. “The fewer clicks the better,” Luzar says.

This idea came from feedback from students. The students were frustrated that they couldn’t get back easily to where they’d been as they navigated the course. They had to click on exterior links to open attachments.

Luzar’s approach to course design is to keep it simple. Although her approach does not use all the features of the LMS, but students have reacted positively to it, and it makes her work easier. “Just because the tools are there doesn’t mean that you have to use them. You have to figure out what your students like and what is within your comfort zone and then merge the two,” Luzar says.

5. Fun, interesting discussion formats

Luzar divides the class into five-member discussion groups and assigns each member with a unique role in each discussion. For example, she’ll have one student serve the role of David Letterman, creating a Top 10 List-style summary of a chapter in the textbook. Another will take on the role of Ann Landers and write a question-and-answer-type column based on the chapter’s material. Another group member, “Oscar,” (as in the Academy Awards) reviews the discussion, and gives awards for exemplary posts in the discussion board, and explains why.

“Students love that. … It teaches them to think differently, perhaps extend their thought or rearrange or cross-reference it. And so that really seems to get people going and lot of times, if I change the discussion roles, students will email and say, ‘Can I be Dave next time?’

“I think we do these types of assignments or discussions or classroom interactions in the face-to-face classroom, so I really believe with a little creativity anything you can do face-to-face can be modified in the online environment. And the students appreciate it.”


Tags: best practices in online teaching, increasing online student retention, online course design, online students, tips for online faculty
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nedrazajoep · I week ago  1p  +2

I am all for quick responses from our professors. The quicker the response the faster I can continue with what I was doing. I don't care about instructor presence as long as I have an easy to access course design and content. Reminders are an added bonus. I like reminders on my calendar at work. Discussion forums are good since we can post at any time convenient to us.

Reply

Kristen Larson · I week ago  2p  +2

I agree with you on the quick responses from our professors - it is a must! Discussion forms are nice since we can post on our time and see the varied responses.

Reply

alegriadelilah · I week ago  1p  +1

This is the most accurate article I've read this month! Quick responses from professors is always appreciated, but I do like that discussion forums allow us to learn from one another. Easy access is also extremely important to me. I may come off as lazy, but Luzar is correct when she states, "The fewer clicks the better." I find it annoying to have to go folder through folder to find an assignment, and then have to click a million more times to return to the home page.

Reply

Kristen Larson · I week ago  2p  +1

Ms. Luzar really brought up some interesting points that I think are great! 1. Quick responses from professors are very helpful because like Ms. Luzar mentioned, many times just a quick response is needed and then the wheel can keep turning so that work can be completed! At times, I have had to wait several days to get a response or there even have been a few times that I have gotten no response at all to my questions. I try and I know many other students try not to ask unnecessary questions and make it a last resort. 2. It is nice to know that we do actually have a real instructor teaching the course and can have interaction with them to make sure we are learning appropriately. 3. Reminders are nice but not always necessary. I like reminders but if a syllabus is provided at the beginning of the course, I like to plug the info into my personal calendar. As backup it is nice to be reminded of upcoming due dates. 4. "Easy-to-access course design" is a true must!! With many activities going on and work to get done, if a website/course set-up is difficult to navigate or coursework is buried in multiple layers, it is often frustrating and time-consuming to get the necessary coursework completed. 5. I haven't ever had a discussion forum set up as Ms. Luzar was mentioning but it sounds interesting and a way to get us to think differently. Overall, I think the ideas mentioned that students want from faculty are pretty accurate.

Reply

Michael Voth · I week ago  1p  +1

I teach physics using flipped classroom strategies which has some of the components of an online course and I agree with the points in this article. The next generation has grown up in a "don't wait for it" era and schooling is included in that. They want grades immediately and feedback and responses right away, as well. As for reminders, Remind 101 is a great tool to send them texts without having their phone numbers. I have heard continual positive feedback of this system. Easy to use course design and instructor presence are also valuable. Students want to know they are learning from a qualified instructor, not a system.

Reply

arethlake71 · I week ago  1p  +1

Of course I would like to get my assignments back quickly. This enables me to work on corrections if needed and schedule time for other work. A week or two is the norm for returning an assignment 4 to 5 weeks that is getting a little out of hand. An instructor needs to answer emails in a day or
two, even if it's to say that your will reply later. I understand instructors are busy, but so am I and so are just about everyone taking a e-learning class.

It is nice to have a instructor that is available to lecture and not just give out notes or recordings. I believe that distance learning should be taught just as you would instruct a face to face class. It's just nice to have students asking questions and listen to the interaction which just might answer your own question.

Reminders are great to have. I don't think I could have completed a couple classes that did not give me a schedule and calender. When I followed the calendar the instructor had provided I was not stressed for time, Especially over 5.5 week classes.

Easy-to-access course design is a must. Blackboard seems to do a pretty good job at making the class easy to design and follow. Blackboard UI has changed a lot over the last 10 years and gotten much better. The discussion formats make for an interesting and fun format of learning, almost a collaborative learning experience. A great way to get a discussion going about a given topic. It's always good to see how some one else views a topic.

Reply

Tim Herrera · 1 week ago

This article nails it. Students really do appreciate a quick response, even if it's from the smartphone saying "I don't have the answer right away but I will get back to you as soon as I can get to my computer." Online students sometimes feel like they are out there floating alone. Quick messages mean a lot to them.

Reply

aalvarez129 · 1 week ago

I think we are all in one accord, that Quick Responses can make or break our online experience with our classes. As we are working through our projects and our weekly assignments, questions will come up, and if we are able to get a quick response from the prof, we can efficiently use the time that we have already separated to work on our online class. With a quick response, the instructor presence goes without saying. We know that there's someone at the other end. This article is very poignant with the other factors as well that make the online course work a legitimate venture. I think my favorite though is Easy-Access Course Design. I haven't had any problems with Blackboard, it seems to do a good enough job to keep me up-to-date and 'stylin' in my class.

My SWAG factor for this Article: 9 out of 10...

Reply

Juanita R. Martinez · 1 week ago

This article pretty much sums it up! I totally feel Ms. Luzar has kept up with her student's concerns and has addressed them appropriately. Kudos to her! This lets her students know she plans on being as dedicated as she hopes they will be. I have been on both sides of this spectrum and I would definitely appreciate any professor that would adapt the points in this article, especially the quick feedback! I know it can be difficult to provide quick responses back to students but doing so really helps the learning process. Reminders are also necessary as this will help students from forgetting something important!!

Reply

iosesamiguel · 6 days ago

I am currently in my third semester in the Master's of Educational Technology Program and I have experienced the privilege of having quick responses from all of my professors, even after midnight. In my first semester, due date reminders from instructors saved me from turning in late work. In my experience, meeting with the professor using collaborative tools or videos, has helped me understand better the curriculum goals.

Reply

Reyna Rangel · 6 days ago

I understand that sometimes it gets hectic and instructors are busy trying to answer emails and questions from students. A fast response is appreciated by the students. As a student I like to receive a quick response. I have had experiences where I ask a simple yes or no question, and the reply that I received is different from what I asked. In that case, my question was not answered and I was hesitant on contacting the instructor again. Communication is vital when taking online courses. Reminders are also great when it comes to meeting deadlines. Getting our assignments graded
quickly or receiving feedback for an assignment as soon as possible is also important when taking online courses. The sooner the better. This way you know where you stand, and you can improve your grade.

Reply

gilbertguerra 1p · 6 days ago 0

I guess we all agree that quick response is important. I believe this is important in any course whether it be in the classroom or online. I appreciate quick responses especially when there are deadlines to meet and I have questions about what I am working on. I believe that with all the technology available there should be no problem in getting quick responses not only from our professors, but anyone else. I also really appreciate reminders and an easy course design. I believe that all of us appreciate this since we are all graduate students and have jobs and families. The reminders and easy course design make things easier. At times we have so much on our plate that a quick reminder will allow us not to forget something important and the easy course design will help with time efficiency. I agree also with making it fun, but not everyone might be willing to role play. Some might be a bit shy or embarrassed and I believe that this might cause a bit of stress for that individual.

Reply

Richard Tramontana 3 days ago 0

We sometimes forget that online students often feel that they are alone and in a dark place. Quick responses and instructor presence goes a long way in addressing that fear.

Reply

smbenders 1p · 4 days ago 0

From someone who has been an online student from associates degree until now while working on my master's degree I have experienced it all. Having instructors who have it together, has a course that is well designed and set up for student success helps ease what I like to call the first couple of weeks stress out. When I log into a class and have to navigate all over the place and feel like I need 18 cups of coffee just to find my path around a course site always causes me serious first week stress. Instructors who respond to my questions and are happy to hear from me is encouraging too. It makes me want to do a great job on my school work and learn everything I can from this person who “gets it” and understands that I am a person too. Having our once a week chat sessions through collaborate also helps with instructor presence and for some reason always helps me feel more at ease.

Reply

Jeannine Freeman 3 days ago 0

I really like the that Ms. Luzar continues to support the way she sets up her classes based on student feedback. It is nice to hear and see an instructor take student feedback and really use it to make changes. All of her suggestions for online class setup are excellent. I think one of the most important is quick feedback. Because it is an online course, many students are working at their own pace and during their free time. It is hard when you sit down to work and have a question and no one answers. It is stressful for the student. I also like the idea of reminders. Especially in online courses, it can be hard to keep up with everything in multiple classes. Some of us can only work one week at a time. It's nice to see those reminders of what's coming up just this week to help stay on track. Overall, an excellent and very informative article. I will definitely be referencing it if I am in a position to create online learning at some point.

Reply

Sindy Reyes 2 days ago 0

I agree with Ms. Luzar's approach. It is more proactive to receive emails to her smartphone and for her to answer it right away than for messages to accumulate and leave the student at a halt until the question is answered.

Reminders are very nice because most of us are full time employees and taking more than one course, as well as have families at home. The reminders are a great help, because our minds are often going 100 miles a minute.

The fun, interesting discussion formats are something that I haven't really encountered. I think that would be a greater incentive to get more authentic student participation and there wouldn't be so much redundancy in everyone's posts.

Lastly, I really appreciate when the course is user-friendly. I look for project models to help guide me and that the syllabus or assignment instructions are clear and easy to follow.

Reply