

FAMU Teaching and Learning Center

AI was used to help generate, organize, and refine content related to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The final document was reviewed and edited to ensure accuracy, relevance, clarity, and alignment with the intended purpose and audience.

Best Practices for Teaching In-Person, Online, and Hybrid Courses

Improving Engagement, Learning, and Student Success

Purpose

The **Florida A&M University Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)** provides this primer as a practical guide to support faculty in strengthening course design, improving student engagement, and enhancing learning across in-person, online, and hybrid learning environments. While each teaching modality has unique opportunities and challenges, effective courses share common qualities: clear organization, purposeful engagement, meaningful assessment, instructor presence, accessibility, and alignment between learning outcomes, instructional activities, and student evaluation.

This primer is designed to help faculty reflect on their current course offerings and identify strategies that can be implemented before, during, and after the semester to improve the student learning experience.

Foundations of Effective Teaching Across All Modalities

Regardless of whether a course is taught face-to-face, online, or hybrid, effective teaching begins with intentional design. Faculty should ensure that students understand what they are expected to learn, how they will demonstrate learning, where to find course materials, how to communicate with the instructor, and how to be successful in the course.

Begin with Clear Learning Outcomes

Strong courses are built around clear, measurable learning outcomes. Learning outcomes should describe what students should know, do, or demonstrate by the end of the course or module.

Faculty should:

- Use measurable action verbs such as **analyze, create, evaluate, apply, compare, explain, design, demonstrate, or critique.**
- Align outcomes with course assessments and learning activities.

- Communicate outcomes clearly in the syllabus, Canvas modules, assignments, and class sessions.
- Revisit outcomes throughout the semester so students understand the purpose of course activities.

Example:

Instead of: “Students will understand leadership.”

Use: “Students will evaluate leadership theories and apply them to real-world organizational scenarios.”

Align Outcomes, Activities, and Assessments

Course alignment means that the learning outcomes, instructional materials, assignments, activities, and assessments work together. Students should not be asked to complete assignments or exams that are disconnected from what they practiced or learned in class.

Faculty should ask:

- What should students learn?
- How will students practice that learning?
- How will students demonstrate mastery?
- What feedback will help students improve?

Alignment Example:

Course Element	Example
Learning Outcome	Students will analyze ethical issues in professional practice.
Learning Activity	Case study discussion in class or online.
Assessment	Written analysis of an ethical dilemma.
Feedback Tool	Rubric measuring analysis, evidence, reasoning, and professional application.

Create a Clear and Organized Course Structure

Students are more likely to succeed when they can easily navigate the course. This is especially important in Canvas, but it also matters in face-to-face courses. A well-organized course reduces confusion, supports time management, and allows students to focus on learning.

Faculty should:

- Use a consistent weekly or module structure.
- Label materials clearly.

- Provide due dates in multiple places, such as the syllabus, Canvas calendar, assignments, and weekly announcements.
- Organize content by week, unit, module, or topic.
- Include a “Start Here” section in Canvas.
- Provide a course schedule that outlines readings, assignments, activities, and assessments.

Recommended Canvas Module Structure:

1. Overview and learning outcomes
2. Required readings or materials
3. Lecture content or instructional media
4. Learning activities
5. Discussion or engagement task
6. Assignment or assessment
7. Summary and next steps

Establish Instructor Presence

Instructor presence is one of the strongest contributors to student engagement, especially in online and hybrid courses. Students need to feel that the instructor is active, available, and invested in their success.

Faculty can establish presence by:

- Posting welcome messages or videos.
- Sending weekly announcements.
- Responding to student questions in a timely manner.
- Participating in discussions.
- Providing meaningful feedback.
- Sharing reminders before major deadlines.
- Offering office hours in multiple formats when possible.
- Using students’ names and acknowledging their contributions.

Recommended Practice:

Post a weekly announcement that includes what students completed last week, what they will focus on this week, upcoming deadlines, and a word of encouragement.

Communicate Expectations Early and Often

Clear communication helps students understand course policies, assignment expectations, participation requirements, technology needs, and pathways for support.

Faculty should clearly communicate:

- How students should contact the instructor.

- Expected response time for emails or messages.
- Assignment submission guidelines.
- Participation expectations.
- Late work policies.
- Grading criteria.
- Technology requirements.
- Academic integrity expectations.
- Campus support resources.

Tip:

Use rubrics and assignment checklists to reduce uncertainty and improve the quality of student submissions.

Use Inclusive and Accessible Teaching Practices

Inclusive teaching recognizes that students bring different backgrounds, experiences, learning preferences, and needs into the classroom. Accessible teaching ensures that students can engage with materials and activities regardless of ability or learning environment.

Faculty should:

- Provide materials in accessible formats.
- Use captions for videos.
- Add alternative text to images.
- Use readable fonts and high-contrast colors.
- Avoid relying on color alone to communicate meaning.
- Provide multiple ways for students to participate.
- Use examples that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences.
- Clarify expectations and avoid hidden assumptions.
- Invite students to share their learning needs.
- Connect students with campus support services when needed.

Best Practices for In-Person Courses

In-person teaching offers rich opportunities for real-time interaction, discussion, active learning, collaboration, and immediate feedback. Effective in-person courses should move beyond lecture-only formats and create opportunities for students to actively process, apply, and reflect on what they are learning.

Use Active Learning Strategies

Active learning requires students to do something meaningful with course content during class. This may include discussing, solving problems, analyzing examples, debating ideas, creating products, or reflecting on learning.

Examples include:

- Think-pair-share
- Small-group problem solving
- Case study analysis
- Polling or quick checks for understanding
- Concept mapping
- Role playing
- Peer teaching
- Classroom debates
- Gallery walks
- Minute papers
- Practice problems
- Student-generated questions

Example Strategy: Think-Pair-Share

1. Ask students a question connected to the lesson.
2. Give students one or two minutes to think individually.
3. Have students discuss their response with a partner.
4. Invite selected students to share with the class.

This strategy increases participation and gives students time to develop their ideas before speaking publicly.

Break Up Lecture with Engagement Moments

Lectures can be effective when they are purposeful, organized, and interactive. However, students benefit when lectures are broken into smaller segments with opportunities to process information.

Faculty should consider:

- Pausing every 10–15 minutes for a question or activity.
- Asking students to summarize key points.
- Using short polls or quick writes.
- Having students solve a problem before revealing the answer.
- Asking students to apply a concept to a scenario.
- Using examples from current events, professional practice, or student experiences.

Build Community in the Classroom

Students are more likely to participate when they feel connected to the instructor and their classmates.

Faculty can build community by:

- Learning and using student names when possible.
- Creating early low-stakes opportunities for interaction.
- Using small groups consistently.
- Establishing discussion norms.
- Encouraging respectful dialogue.
- Connecting course content to students' goals and experiences.
- Inviting students to contribute examples from their disciplines or communities.

Check for Understanding Frequently

Faculty should not wait until the exam to discover that students are struggling. Frequent low-stakes checks allow instructors to adjust instruction and provide support.

Examples include:

- Exit tickets
- Poll questions
- Practice quizzes
- Muddiest point reflections
- One-minute papers
- Short application activities
- In-class problem solving
- Quick peer review

Muddiest Point Prompt:

“What concept from today’s class is still unclear or needs more explanation?”

Make Attendance Meaningful

In-person attendance should provide value beyond receiving information that could be read independently. Students should experience class time as an opportunity to engage, ask questions, practice skills, collaborate, and receive feedback.

Faculty should:

- Use class time for application and discussion.
- Connect attendance to meaningful participation.
- Avoid using class only to repeat textbook content.

- Provide opportunities for students to practice what they will be assessed on.
- Explain how in-class activities support course outcomes.

Best Practices for Online Courses

Online courses require intentional design, clear communication, and strong instructor presence. Students need structure, consistency, and frequent opportunities to interact with content, classmates, and the instructor.

Design for Clarity and Navigation

Online students should never have to guess where to begin, what to do next, or how to submit work.

Faculty should:

- Create a “Start Here” module.
- Use consistent module organization.
- Provide weekly overviews.
- Include clear assignment instructions.
- Link directly to readings, videos, activities, and assessments.
- Use the Canvas calendar and due dates.
- Avoid unnecessary navigation complexity.
- Review the course from the student view before the semester begins.

Create Weekly Instructor Presence

In online courses, instructor presence must be intentionally created. Students should see and hear from the instructor regularly.

Strategies include:

- Weekly announcements.
- Short instructor videos.
- Discussion participation.
- Personalized feedback.
- Virtual office hours.
- Midweek reminders.
- End-of-week summaries.
- Clarification posts based on common student questions.

Weekly Announcement Template:

- Greeting

- Recap of last week
- Focus for this week
- Required readings or materials
- Assignments and due dates
- Common reminders
- Encouragement or success tip

Promote Meaningful Online Discussions

Online discussions should be more than a requirement to post and reply. They should invite analysis, application, reflection, debate, or problem-solving.

Faculty should:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Use case studies, scenarios, images, data, or current issues.
- Require students to support claims with evidence.
- Encourage students to connect ideas to course concepts.
- Provide clear expectations for initial posts and replies.
- Use rubrics.
- Participate strategically without dominating the discussion.
- Summarize key themes after discussions close.

Stronger Discussion Prompt:

“Review the case scenario provided. Identify the central problem, apply one course concept to analyze the situation, and recommend a solution. In your replies, compare your classmates’ recommendations with your own and identify one strength or limitation.”

Use Multimedia Purposefully

Videos, podcasts, slides, and interactive tools can support online learning when they are aligned with learning outcomes and used intentionally.

Faculty should:

- Keep instructional videos focused and concise.
- Use captions and transcripts.
- Break longer lectures into shorter segments.
- Add guiding questions before videos or readings.
- Use media to explain difficult concepts, demonstrate processes, or provide instructor presence.
- Avoid overloading students with too many disconnected resources.

Provide Timely and Meaningful Feedback

Feedback is essential in online learning because students may feel uncertain about their progress. Feedback should help students understand what they did well, what needs improvement, and how to improve.

Faculty should:

- Use rubrics for major assignments.
- Provide feedback within a reasonable timeframe.
- Use audio or video feedback when appropriate.
- Highlight patterns of strengths and weaknesses.
- Provide examples of successful work when possible.
- Offer revision opportunities for selected assignments.

Best Practices for Hybrid Courses

Hybrid courses combine in-person and online learning. The most effective hybrid courses intentionally connect both environments so that online and face-to-face activities work together rather than operate as separate experiences.

Clearly Explain the Hybrid Structure

Students need to understand how the course is organized and what happens online versus in person.

Faculty should explain:

- Which days or activities are in person.
- Which activities are online.
- How online work prepares students for in-person sessions.
- How in-person work connects to online assignments.
- Attendance and participation expectations.
- Technology requirements.
- Weekly workflow.

Tip:

Include a visual weekly schedule that shows what students do before class, during class, and after class.

Use the Online Space for Preparation and Reflection

Online activities should prepare students for deeper engagement during in-person class meetings.

Online activities may include:

- Reading quizzes
- Short lecture videos
- Discussion reflections
- Case preparation
- Practice problems
- Pre-class questions
- Concept checks
- Collaborative documents

In-person sessions can then focus on:

- Application
- Discussion
- Problem solving
- Group work
- Labs or demonstrations
- Feedback
- Clarification of difficult concepts

Make Connections Between Modalities Explicit

Students should understand how each part of the hybrid course supports the other. Faculty should regularly explain the purpose of online and in-person activities.

Examples:

- “Your online reflection will prepare you for Thursday’s debate.”
- “Today’s group activity builds on the video lecture from this week.”
- “The case study discussion will help you prepare for the upcoming written analysis.”

Maintain Consistent Weekly Patterns

Hybrid courses can become confusing if the schedule changes frequently. A predictable rhythm helps students manage their time.

Example Weekly Pattern:

Day/Mode	Activity
Monday Online	Watch lecture video and complete reading quiz
Wednesday In Person	Case discussion and group activity
Friday Online	Submit reflection or application assignment

Balance Workload Across Environments

Faculty should ensure that hybrid courses do not unintentionally become more work than fully in-person courses. Online work should replace some in-class time, not simply add extra tasks.

Faculty should:

- Estimate student workload.
- Avoid duplicating activities.
- Keep online activities purposeful.
- Align activities with learning outcomes.
- Ask students for feedback on workload and clarity.

Strategies to Improve Student Engagement

Student engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation in learning. Engaged students attend, participate, think deeply, complete assignments, interact with others, and see value in the course.

Connect Content to Student Goals

Students are more motivated when they understand why the content matters.

Faculty should:

- Explain how course concepts apply to careers, communities, research, or real-world problems.
- Use examples from professional practice.
- Invite students to connect content to their interests.
- Include authentic assignments that resemble real tasks in the discipline.

Use Low-Stakes Assignments

Low-stakes assignments encourage practice and reduce pressure before major assessments.

Examples include:

- Reading reflections
- Practice quizzes
- Draft submissions
- Discussion posts
- Problem sets
- Learning journals
- Exit tickets
- Peer reviews
- Short concept checks

Encourage Student-to-Student Interaction

Students benefit from learning with and from one another.

Strategies include:

- Peer review
- Group problem solving
- Collaborative presentations
- Discussion groups
- Study teams
- Peer teaching
- Debate teams
- Project-based learning

Provide Choice When Appropriate

Student choice can increase motivation and ownership.

Examples of choice:

- Selecting a research topic.
- Choosing between assignment formats.
- Selecting case studies or project contexts.
- Choosing discussion questions.
- Offering options for final projects.

Use Reflection to Deepen Learning

Reflection helps students make meaning from learning experiences.

Reflection prompts include:

- What did you learn this week?
- What concept challenged your thinking?
- How does this topic connect to your career goals?
- What strategy helped you learn?
- What feedback will you use to improve your next assignment?

Assessment and Feedback Best Practices

Assessment should measure student learning and support improvement. Effective assessment includes both formative and summative approaches.

Use Formative Assessment

Formative assessments are low-stakes activities that help faculty and students monitor learning before major exams or projects.

Examples:

- Practice quizzes
- Drafts
- Polls
- Exit tickets
- Self-assessments
- Peer feedback
- Short reflections
- Concept checks

Use Rubrics

Rubrics help students understand expectations and help faculty grade consistently.

A strong rubric includes:

- Criteria aligned with learning outcomes.
- Performance levels.
- Clear descriptions of expectations.
- Points or value for each category.

Provide Feedback Students Can Use

Effective feedback is specific, timely, and forward-looking.

Feedback should answer:

- What did the student do well?
- What needs improvement?
- What specific action should the student take next?

Design Authentic Assessments

Authentic assessments ask students to apply knowledge and skills in realistic contexts.

Examples include:

- Case analyses
- Presentations
- Portfolios
- Policy briefs
- Lesson plans
- Business proposals
- Research posters
- Professional memos
- Community-based projects
- Lab reports
- Creative products

Technology Integration Best Practices

Technology should support learning outcomes, not distract from them. Faculty should choose tools based on instructional purpose.

Questions to Ask Before Using a Tool

- What learning outcome does this tool support?
- Will it improve engagement, practice, feedback, or assessment?
- Is it accessible to students?
- Is it easy to use?
- Does it protect student privacy?
- Do students need training or instructions?
- Is there a simpler option?

Common Uses of Technology

Instructional Goal	Technology Use
Communication	Announcements, inbox, discussion boards
Organization	Canvas modules, calendar, checklists
Engagement	Polls, discussions, collaborative documents
Assessment	Quizzes, rubrics, assignments
Feedback	SpeedGrader, video/audio comments
Content Delivery	Pages, videos, slides, readings
Reflection	Journals, surveys, discussion prompts

Course Readiness Checklist

Faculty can use the following checklist before the course begins:

Course Design

- Learning outcomes are clear and measurable.
- Assessments align with learning outcomes.
- Weekly or module structure is consistent.
- Assignments include clear instructions.
- Rubrics are included for major assignments.
- Workload is appropriate for the course level and credit hours.

Canvas Organization

- The course includes a Start Here section.
- The syllabus is posted and accessible.
- Modules are clearly organized.
- Due dates are entered into Canvas.
- Navigation is simple and student-friendly.
- Links and files have been checked.
- The course has been reviewed in Student View.

Communication

- Instructor contact information is easy to find.
- Office hours are listed.
- Response time expectations are stated.
- Weekly communication plan is prepared.
- Course policies are clearly explained.

Accessibility

- Videos are captioned.
- Images include alternative text.
- Documents are accessible.
- Headings are used properly.
- Color contrast is readable.
- Materials are available in advance when possible.

Engagement

- Students have opportunities to interact with the instructor.
- Students have opportunities to interact with classmates.
- Students have opportunities to apply course concepts.
- Low-stakes assessments are included.
- Feedback opportunities are built into the course.

Questions for Faculty Reflection

Faculty may use the following questions to guide course improvement:

1. What do I want students to remember, apply, or value after this course ends?
2. Where do students typically struggle in this course?
3. How can I make expectations clearer?
4. How often do students receive feedback before major assessments?
5. What opportunities do students have to actively engage with course content?
6. How do I create instructor presence in the course?
7. How do students interact with one another?
8. Are my assessments aligned with my learning outcomes?
9. Are my course materials accessible?
10. What is one change I can make this semester to improve student learning?

Recommended Next Steps for Faculty

Faculty are encouraged to use this primer as a starting point for course improvement. Small, intentional changes can have a meaningful impact on student engagement and learning.

Recommended next steps include:

1. Review your syllabus and Canvas course for clarity and organization.
2. Identify one course outcome and check its alignment with assignments and activities.
3. Add one low-stakes engagement activity each week.
4. Create or revise one rubric for a major assignment.
5. Add a weekly announcement or communication plan.
6. Review course materials for accessibility.
7. Request feedback from students during the semester.
8. Schedule a consultation with the FAMU Teaching and Learning Center or the Office of Instructional Technology.

In Closing

The **FAMU Teaching and Learning Center** is committed to supporting faculty in creating engaging, inclusive, and effective learning experiences across all instructional modalities. Whether teaching in person, online, or hybrid, faculty play a critical role in shaping student success. Through intentional course design, meaningful engagement, clear communication, effective assessment, and ongoing reflection, faculty can create learning environments that help students thrive academically, professionally, and personally.