COMMISSION ON PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

Online Education: Standards and Best Practices

Working Group Recommendations

"

Effective online education transforms student learning experiences

Edited By: Carolyn Mae Kim, Ph.D., APR

The Purpose and Task

The CPRE 2017 *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State, Educators and Practitioners* report identified online education in public relations education as both an area that is influencing the future of public relations and that needs further clarification for guidelines and standards.

Standards & Training for Faculty

Online educators require specific training and development opportunities to be effective in digital education.

Infrastructure Requirements

Launching and maintaining online programs require several resources that institutions should understand, explore, and commit to providing online programs.

Best Practices & Assessment

Online learning environments present new ways for faculty to interact with students, monitor learning, and evaluate overall retention in courses.

PR Digital Pedagogy

Expanding on the core constructs required in the public relations curriculum, online educators must match pedagogical practices to specific competencies.

Standards & Training for Faculty

Faculty who teach online commit to helping students learn in a digital environment. Beyond a desire and capacity to teach online, educators should commit to training prior to teaching online.

The rapidly changing nature of digital learning requires that online faculty commit to regular development opportunities to maintain competencies in the latest standards, trends and practices of digital pedagogy and instructional design.

Resources to Leverage

Pedagogy & Learning Management System Training

A core component to online education is the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS). Faculty who plan to teach online should participate in their university sponsored LMS training to learn about the particular platform their institution employs.

Design

Often, higher educational institutions will have an online learning department with *Instructional Designers* that help develop and design an online course within an LMS. It is a helpful partnership with faculty. The LMS experts can identify the nuances of each platform and leading trends. In the context of design, it is important that faculty are directly involved in the design of their courses. Instead of approaching the design of courses as a one-size-fits-all, educators should seek to individualize courses, just as they do in the traditional classroom.

Online Pedagogy

Beyond an LMS and understanding what it is like to teach or learn online, there are numerous other elements to online education such as assessment, standards, grading and rubric best-practices, etc. It is a best-practice for faculty to receive an online education certification through organizations such as Quality Matters or the Online Learning Consortium. These certifications allow faculty to learn standards and practices that are established and verified through third-party organizations. This can prevent institutions from only looking internally for ideas and practices for online education.

Management

In addition to designing a course, faculty should have training on the management of an LMS system. For example, how to use the tools, the various functions such as grading systems, announcements, student engagement reports, etc.. These online management practices can provide measurements of quality, teaching impact, and student engagement – and thus, knowing how to leverage the management tools can have a deep impact on the perceptions and opinions of online educators.

Third Party Apps

Chairs and program directors should also consider having faculty who teach online learning programs from other third-party partners such as HubSpot, Hootsuite, and Google Academy. These third-party applications and partnerships are often integrated into courses, but there is a need to establish best-practices for faculty who choose to do this type of integration.

These best practices serve two purposes. First, it allows the faculty member to fully experience what students will also experience in a course. Second, it ensures that faculty members fully understand *how* the integration with the course works. Faculty should ensure that any third-party partnership or app has the capacity and resources to effectively integrate with a course.

Infrastructure Requirements

Beyond faculty and what individual programs or departments may be able to offer, institutions should have a full range of resources available for online students.

While traditional programs often have the benefit of these resources already existing for students, when launching online programs, there needs to be careful consideration of the resources required.

Student Services

Services that should be available for students include:

Academic Advising

Advising should be available beyond traditional work-hours as many online students are working full-time themselves and need this resources outside of typical hours.

Library

Institutions should ensure that their online holdings are sufficient for online programs or courses. Faculty teaching these courses should identify which reading assignments will be available digitally instead of on reserve at the library.

Tech Support / IT Help Desk

While faculty should be knowledgeable in the LMS and technology, they should not be the sole source of information for trouble-shooting students. This will distract faculty from teaching and reduce the impact in the educational environment. Institutions should have an identified process and available support for students with technology related questions.

Accommodations

A growing area of focus when beginning designs is ensuring online education is accessible – which means files need to be created and uploaded in certain ways, visuals such as video and photos have particular requirements when being designs, and LMS designs (including information on syllabi) need to meet particular criteria. When beginning to design for online courses, it is important that institutions have a compliance person that can verify courses are meeting these requirements, as well as ensuring faculty are able to work with the Learning Center on campus to support students with a variety of learning needs in a digital context. Faculty should work closely with the Learning Center to understand how particular accommodations may work within a digital environment. Faculty must make students aware of the resources available to them throughout the course.

Tools

Another dimension of infrastructure is to ensure that programs and technology required for students in courses are available through online options, potentially looking at digital and cloud based solutions for digital learners. Programs may find that there are additional costs for courses with video conferencing, email management, and digital tools that are needed to facilitate faculty interaction, assignments and communication needs.
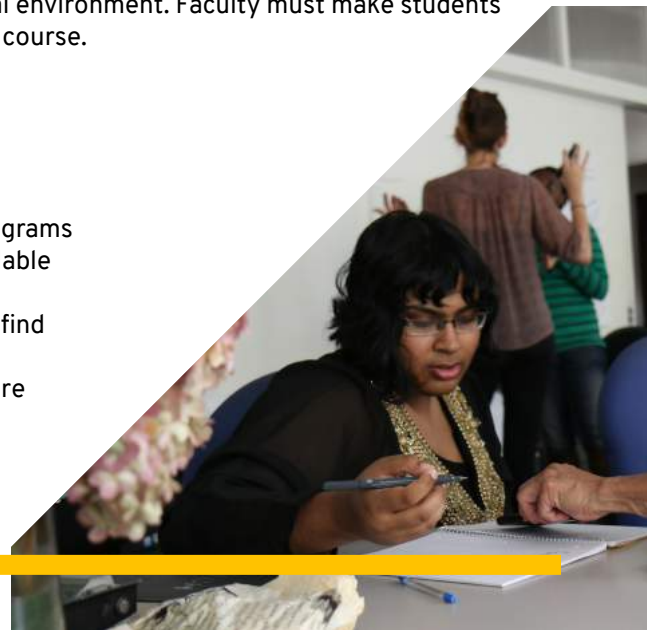
Best Practices For Online Learning

Key Idea	Explanation
Learning Expectations	Best practices require students to be made aware of all of the program and course expectations prior to beginning a class. Some of the ways program and course expectations should be set include that students should know the technology requirements, deadline expectations for assignments and registration, communication protocols, and faculty roles/responsibility. Students should be able to identify what communication knowledge they need to have in order to effectively complete the course (basic computer knowledge, advanced program skills, etc.).
Learning Outcomes	Students should always understand the outcome expected in any program of study. In a digital environment, the program learning outcomes should be clearly available. For each course, students should be introduced to course learning outcomes at the beginning of the class and reminded of these throughout the term. These learning outcomes should be written in ways students can easily understand and ways that are measurable through assessment. Additionally, best-practices include each learning module having a learning outcome.
Communication	Communication in an online learning environment is extremely important. It can influence a student's learning, motivation, desire to stay enrolled, and belief that students are connected to peers and the faculty member. One myth about online learning is that after a course is created, it is actually easier and quicker to teach than an online course. The reality is, however, online education is far more time intensive when run correctly because of the levels of individualize communication. Faculty should be prepared for regular and substantive communication to: 1) the entire class; 2) assignments and grading; 3) facilitating peer to peer communication; and 4) individual student interaction from faculty members.
Class Sizes	Because of the time and effort required to effectively leverage these practices, careful attention should be given to course sizes. There are many factors that institutions face when determining course sizes. Skills based courses should not exceed a 1:20 ratio. For courses that are lecture based, the size may expand, potentially up to 30-40 students in a section. However, a clear explanation of the preservation for the integrity of learning and direct faculty communication with students should be provided.

Assessment in Online Education

There is an ethical obligation to ensure that students who are participating in learning communities are having access to the quality and standards of education offered by that institution in traditional settings. Therefore, a best-practice is that there is a strong culture of assessment for programs offering degrees or courses online. Programs should develop a clear and comprehensive curriculum map for any online degree or when adding an online course. This will identify the specific learning outcome(s) for each class and the level of learning that should occur within that course. Additionally, key assignments should be identified that are to be assessed for the learning outcome.

Key Idea	Explanation
Faculty Assessment	Faculty should own the assessment culture – meaning it does not rest on one individual, administrator or only the faculty teaching a course. Rather, it is an integrative process that brings together the faculty community within a program to regularly evaluate the impact of learning occurring in programs. Assessment is not about evaluating a single educator or their pedagogy but about evaluating the learning processes from introduction to mastery over the course of an entire program. In an online course, it is important to ensure the level of learning is meeting the expectation and levels that happen in traditional courses.
Students & Assessment	Including students in the assessment process is a valuable tool. It allows them to reflect on their learning and provide insight into opportunities, challenges, and success points. Some programs choose to do an assessment process with current students while others may leverage young alumni, or a combined approach. Whatever method best fits an institution, it is important that students are included in the assessment of the learning for degrees and courses online.
Rubrics & Grading	Rubrics are an effective way to calibrate faculty understandings for learning outcomes and to include a variety of voices in the assessment process. It also allows for a clear articulation of what should be learned and how that will be measured. S*tudents should be able to easily access and understand the criterion used for evaluation..* Grading should occur regularly throughout an online course – ideally, students will receive some scores each week to indicate their progress in the course content. It is particularly important in an online environment that educators are prompt in providing feedback and scoring.

PR Digital Pedagogy

While there is substantial insight into general online pedagogy, there are gaps in understanding when to apply particular practices in the context of public relations competencies.

Faculty who are teaching online will benefit from reviewing particular approaches to learning that are unique to public relations subjects. Across the board, faculty should consider the learning outcomes, level of Bloom's taxonomy, and appropriate tools that can help achieve the unique competencies requires for the particular subject matter rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogies in digital learning.

Writing assignments are the #1 pedagogical approach for online courses such as: strategic planning in PR; writing for PR; PR theory; PR management; and Internships.

Moving away from suggesting "textbooks" for online courses, readings from blogs & articles online are the top pedagogical recommendation for courses such as PR research and PR ethics.

Recommended are new media, simulations, and intentional communication elements (messaging, discussion boards) represented key recommendations for PR pedagogy.

Top 5 Pedagogical Practices

- WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
- VIDEOS
- MESSAGING
- DISCUSSION BOARDS
- READING (BLOGS OR ONLINE ARTICLES)

Method

Based on a Spring 2019, online survey of faculty and students, in which applicants were recruited internationally to participate in the study.

Tools & Resources

Over the last several years, a variety of resources have launched that assist faculty in enhancing online pedagogy and digital education.

These tools come in a vareity of categories including ones designed to help develop competencies in teaching online, ones related to particular learning management systems for online education, third party certifications that educators can integrate into curriculum, and tools available to assist in digital learning and communication.

The following provides a variety of tools for those who are looking for additional support in online education.

Online Teaching Resources
1. Quality Matters Teaching Online Certificate
2. Online Teaching Consortium Teaching Certificate Program

Digital Curricular Integrations

1. LinkedIn Learning (video trainings on a variety of topics)

2. The Page Center for Public Integrity Ethics Curriculum

3. The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations Webinars

4. HubSpot Academy (various online certifications)

5. Hootsuite Certification (Hootsuite platform certification)

6. Google Skillshop

7. Adobe Education Exchange

LMS Third Party Training
1. Blackboard Training and Certifications
2. Canvas Training

Communication Development Tools

1. Piktochart (Infographic and presentation creation)

2. Canva (Visuals and presentation creation)

3. Loom (Video and screen recorder)

4. Camtasia (Video and screen recorder)

5. Unsplash (Images for presentations)

Scheduling Office Hours

1. Google Calendar Appointments
2. Doodle

Video Conferencing & Presentations
1. Zoom
2. Skype
3. Go To Meeting
4. WebEx

ADA Compliance
It is important to remember all ADA compliance requirements for your institution when integrated additional technology components to your course.

Academic Advising for Online Students

✓ Time Expectations

Contrary to what many believe, online learning often requires more time than is expected. While there is *flexibility,* academic advising should address whether students, realistically, have the time in their schedules to be successful in the number of units they are registering for in an online environment. Consider competing time needs such as work, other courses, family obligations, etc. Set realistic expectations.

✓ Independent Work

While online work is not completed in isolation, there is a sense of independence that is inherent in the flexibility provided. Academic advising should address the strategies the student may use to manage the independent nature of online courses.

✓ Faculty Roles

For some online students, digital learning is more like an independent course taken online. The reality is, faculty should be deeply invested and interactive throughout a course. Academic advising can set base expectations for what faculty will be expecting from students in terms of communication, but also what students can expect from faculty (personal communication, office hour availability, etc.).

✓ Student Expectations

A final component to academic advising is covering expectations for students enrolled in online courses. Be sure they understand the minimum grade required to have the course count toward the degree, what counts as being "active" in the course and what could result in an "unofficial withdraw." Familiarize students with the resources available to them as learners including ways to request accommodations, report delays and other supports based on unique circumstances.

Since students who are online learners have a different profile and experience traditional students, it is helpful to provide a unique academic advising experience.

Each student should have the following information for future reference and their records.

1. The program learning outcomes and objectives

2. A curriculum guide to map which courses to take in what semesters

3. An individual success plan that lists a unique academic plan for them

4. A resource sheet that contains contact information and a brief explanation of services from key campus partners

Course Size

To help create consensus on this area, administration, finance, enrollment, and faculty should all work together to establish the standards and practices that will apply to online programs.

Based on these factors, programs can determine numbers that are economically beneficial while ensuring that each student in the course enjoys substantive communication and a dynamic learning environment. In general, courses that range 20-25 seem to be optimal for facilitating substantive feedback between the faculty member and students, developing cohesive and interactive learning communities, and creating strong learning outcomes. Programs may use a variety of models to expand that number, based on the factors above. It's also important to clearly articulate how the values of online education (learning outcomes, substantive and regular communication, and a cohesive digital community) are ensured in these models.

Economic Factors

Institutions need to ensure that courses are financially feasible. When appropriate, courses that can accommodate more students represent an opportunity for additional resources for the institution, program and faculty. Thus, establishing a *base* number required is important for the institution.

Faculty Load

When faculty engage in an online learning environment, the result is often a higher work-load. Although faculty can prepare resources in advance, the individual communication and regular class interaction equals and even surpasses a traditional course. Institutions should evaluate how many courses a faculty member is carrying and whether the faculty member can effectively manage a higher enrollment while ensuring the same level of education.

Assignments

Just as in traditional education, online courses should have unique assignments. The assignment type and outcome expected will help shape the number of students the course can accommodate. Does a course have multiple assignments that need feedback, or larger projects that require substantial time? What are the competency levels expected (introductory, developing, mastery) and what anticipation is there for faculty feedback?

Resources

For some programs, faculty may have access to additional resources that can help handle the bandwidth of online education. There may be TAs available for grading, someone to help with student communication, or even cohorts of graduate assistants who will mentor particular groups of students over the course of the semester on projects.

Work Group

Chair
Carolyn Mae Kim, Ph.D., APR │ Biola University

Members

Danny Craig, APR │ Stantec
Dave Remund, Ph.D., PRSA Fellow, APR │ Drake University
Hemant Gaule │ School of Communications & Reputation
Isaac Moche │ HubSpot
Karen Freberg, Ph.D. │ University of Louisville
Karen Sutherland, Ph.D. │ University of the Sunshine Coast
Keith A. Quesenberry, M.S. IMC │ Messiah College
Leo Morejon │ Build & Inspire